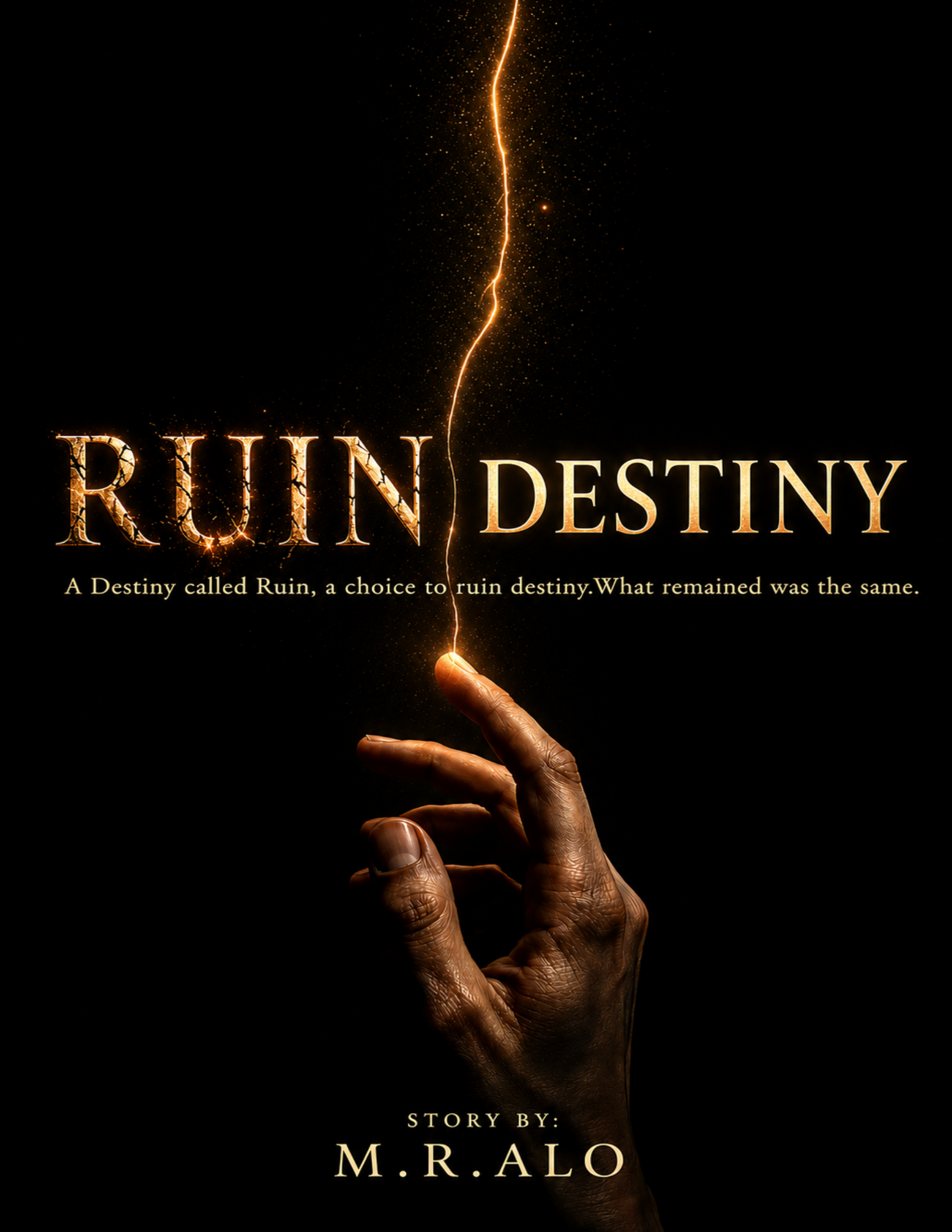
RUIN DESTINY
A Destiny called Ruin, a choice to ruin destiny.What remained was the same.
STORY BY:
M.R.ALO

RUIN DESTINY

By M. R. Alo

A NOTE ON THIS MANUSCRIPT

This is not a story. Stories can be rewritten. They can be softened at the edges, reshaped by time, revised until the hard parts become something more comfortable to carry.

What you are holding is a manuscript: specific, unrevised, preserved in exactly the form it left the hand that wrote it. It is the only thing in this world that competes with fate. Not because it is powerful. Because it is accurate.

Fate becomes myth. Myth becomes legend. Legend loses the specific details that make it hurt. The manuscript keeps them.

The manuscript is the last act of defiance this story contains and it is the smallest one, and perhaps the only one that worked.

THREE VOICES

I will tell you the truth about Aera Bat-Shalem.
Not the truth the songs carry. The other one.

Elan Marsh, writing by lantern light, age unknown

I found her thirty-seven times. I watched her die thirty-six.
This is the one that gets recorded.

Sorin Ben-Shalem, loop thirty-seven, from an account no record carries

She said: I understand. Then she stepped forward.
The Loom did not stop her. It never does.
That is the cruelest truth this story contains.

Aera Bat-Shalem, Aeturnis, last spoken words before the end

RUIN DESTINY

M. R. Alo

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Fate becomes myth. Myth becomes legend.

ACT ONE

EXILIUM

The Cost of Survival

CHAPTER 1

THE LANTERN

The pen is heavier than he remembers.

Elan Marsh has been carrying it since Aeturnis, wrapped in a piece of oilcloth he stole from Davan's pack before Davan walked into the light and did not come back. He has carried it across marshland and salt flat and failing farmland, through towns that didn't know yet what had happened at the edge of the world, past soldiers still arguing over a war that had already ended in a way none of them would understand for months. He has carried it the whole way here, to this desk, this room, this single lantern burning low enough that the flame bends when he breathes.

He picks up the pen. He puts it down. He sits for a while in the silence the lantern makes which is different from regular silence, warmer, more honest and looks at the blank first page of the manuscript he has been composing in his head since somewhere between Memora and Dolorath, when he understood that someone was going to have to do this.

It was always going to be him. That is not vanity. That is just the shape of what happened.

He picks up the pen again.

I will tell you the truth about Aera Bat-Shalem. Not the truth the songs carry. The other one.

He writes it at the top of the page and then stops again, because the next sentence is harder than the first and he needs a moment to remember that hard is not the same as impossible, and that impossible is not the same as wrong.

Outside, something calls in the dark. A bird. An ordinary bird doing an ordinary bird thing at the edge of an ordinary night, completely indifferent to the fact that the world nearly ended two weeks ago and that the man in this room is the only person who knows the full story.

He almost laughs. Aera would have laughed. She had a particular way of laughing at the universe's terrible timing a short sound, more exhalation than amusement, the kind of laugh that said: of course. Of course it is like this. Of course you would send a bird.

She was named for the divine breath that animates the world. By the end, she was the wind that unmade it.

Her full name was Daughter of Peace. He has been sitting with that irony long enough now that it has stopped being bitter and started being something else something he doesn't have a word for yet, but will by the time he finishes this page.

The lantern gutters. He adjusts the wick.

He is not a Veilborn. He cannot see the threads of the Loom or read what they mean. He is not a soldier or a scholar or a man of any particular consequence. He is a cartographer who got hired to map salt flats and ended up at the edge of everything, watching. That is, he has come to understand, exactly the right person for this job.

He writes the second sentence. Then the third. Then he does not stop until the lantern burns down to nothing, and by then it doesn't matter because morning has come without him noticing, the way mornings do when you are doing the only thing that needs doing.

Begin at the beginning.

But the beginning is not where you think it is.

The beginning is a girl in the salt flats, surviving.

Start there.

CHAPTER 2

THE MERCENARY

Her name, the one she was using that week, was Sela. Sela Voss, mercenary-for-hire, available for route security, conflict resolution, and the occasional retrieval job that nobody else would take. She had been Sela Voss for about eight months, which was longer than she usually kept a name. The previous name had been Ras. Before that, Meren. She had a system: short names, unremarkable surnames, nothing that could be tracked back to old records or old faces or old mistakes.

She had a lot of old mistakes.

The salt flats of Exilium were the color of old bone in the morning light, and they smelled like iron and distance. She liked them for this. Nothing hid well on flat white land not bandits, not Thornguard scouting parties, not the particular kind of man who follows someone for three days without quite catching up. She could see trouble coming from a long way off, which was the only advantage Exilium offered and the only advantage she required.

She was cross-legged on a flat rock at the edge of the waystop, sharpening her second knife, when the caravan arrived. Six wagons, two of them loaded heavy, three guards who moved like they'd learned their work in

theory rather than practice. A merchant named Osh who had sweated through his coat despite the morning cold. And, trailing behind the last wagon like something that had attached itself and couldn't be removed, a man with two bags, a rolled instrument case, and absolutely no business being anywhere near the salt flats.

She watched him navigate the wagon ruts with the focused misery of someone who had recently discovered that the world contained surfaces worse than cobblestones. He stumbled once, caught himself on the wagon's side panel, and a flat leather case fell from under his arm. He retrieved it, checked it with anxious hands, and exhaled when it opened and the contents maps, she thought, rolled tight were unharmed.

A cartographer. She catalogued this and filed it away.

Osh found her on the rock, which took him a while because she was not particularly interested in being found.

"Sela Voss," he said, the way people say a name when they're hoping it comes with a discount. "I was told you know the northern crossing."

"I know three crossings," she said without looking up from the knife. "The northern one is the worst. That's probably why you need it."

Osh admitted that yes, the main road was compromised. Thornguard checkpoints. Someone in his previous party had been carrying something that

attracted attention. He didn't say what. She didn't ask. These were the kinds of details that were better not to hold.

"Four crowns," she said. "Per day. Plus supplies. And your cartographer stays in the middle of the formation and doesn't wander."

Osh blinked. "He's not my"

"He's with you. He wanders, he's dead, and then your map is gone and you're lost. So four crowns, supplies, and he stays in the middle."

There was a pause in which Osh calculated the cost of arguing versus the cost of being lost in the salt flats without a mercenary and decided that four crowns was, in fact, quite reasonable.

"Done," he said.

She resheathed the knife and stood. The morning was already getting warm too warm for the season, one of those wrongful spring days that arrived early and left a person faintly uneasy. She noticed it, the way she noticed most things: filed it, moved on.

That evening, at camp, she sat across the fire from the cartographer and watched him eat his meal with the single-minded attention of a man who had not eaten since morning and was only just now remembering that this was an oversight. He was young late twenties, maybe with the kind of face that remembered everything it saw, which she recognized because she had that face

too and had spent considerable effort learning to make it look like something else.

He caught her watching and offered a slightly embarrassed smile.

"Elan," he said. "Elan Marsh. I'm not a problem."

"I didn't say you were."

"You were looking at me like I might be."

She looked at the fire instead. "I look at everything like it might be. It's a professional habit."

He considered this. "That sounds exhausting."

"It's efficient," she said. "Eat your food. We move before dawn."

He ate. She watched the fire. Somewhere to the east, something moved in the dark just the wind picking up salt and throwing it but she tracked it until it settled, because that was what she did. That was the whole job.

She did not tell him her real name. She would not tell anyone her real name for a long time yet. But she let him thank her for the meal suggestion, and she didn't walk away when he began, quietly and without preamble, to describe the stars visible from the salt flats and how they differed from the stars over Ruina, which he'd seen once as a boy.

She did not particularly care about stars. But it was late and the fire was warm and it had been a long time since anyone had talked to her without wanting something in return.

She let him talk.

CHAPTER 3

THE COST

The ambush on the second day was not sophisticated, which almost made it worse. Four men with crossbows in a dry riverbed, which was not a dry riverbed until two days ago when the river inexplicably reversed course and left this particular stretch of Exilium with an extra inch of mud and a new, convenient depression. Loom-bleed, she recognized immediately. The Fracture warping geography again, quiet and incidental, as though the world was just occasionally forgetting which direction water was supposed to run.

She had already identified the depression as a problem when the first bolt came over the lead wagon. Not a warning shot. A miss. There is a difference.

She was off her horse before the second bolt fired. The merchants were shouting behind her uselessly, the specific kind of noise that frightens horses and accomplishes nothing and the three guards were doing exactly what she'd predicted, which was looking at each other for someone to tell them what to do. She was already running along the base of the wagon line, low, using the bulk of the loaded carts for cover. Her first knife was in her hand. The four

men in the depression were recocking crossbows, which took time, and time was the only currency that mattered right now.

She counted to three. Then she went over the edge.

The fight was not long. It was not clean. She had stopped expecting clean fights somewhere around the third year of this life, when she'd understood that clean fights existed in songs and not in salt flats. She came out of it with a cut along her forearm that would need stitching, mud from knee to hip, and a headache from where someone's elbow had caught her above the ear. All four men were incapacitated. She had not killed them, which she made a policy of when the objective could be achieved without it. They would not follow. People who had been methodically disarmed by someone who knew exactly what they were doing rarely tried again immediately.

She climbed back over the depression's edge. The lead merchant had fallen off his bench. One horse was still panicking at the end of its tether. The three guards had their swords drawn and were pointing them in different directions, as though the threat might come from any direction except the one she'd just returned from.

Elan was standing beside the middle wagon with his instrument case held against his chest like a shield, which was she had to admit, privately, where no one could record it both useless and somehow touching.

"Are you injured?" he called across the distance.

She looked at her arm. "Somewhat."

"Should I" He held up his bag in a way that suggested he had supplies and was offering them and was also aware this offer might be declined.

She crossed to him, which saved him having to cross to her. He stitched her arm with the focused competence of someone who had done it before but not often enough to be comfortable about it. He winced when the needle went through. She did not.

"You didn't kill them," he said, not quite a question.

"No."

"They'll try again. Someone else's caravan."

"Probably."

He tied off the last stitch and sat back. There was a long pause in which he seemed to be deciding whether to say the next thing.

"Doesn't that bother you?"

She looked at the horizon, which was the same color it always was, indifferent and very far away. She said yes. That's why she didn't think about it until she needed to.

He accepted this. She appreciated that he accepted it without trying to fix it without offering a better philosophy or a kinder way to carry the thing. He just nodded, once, and began packing up his supplies.

That night, Osh's cook a woman named Brea who moved through camp with the efficiency of someone who had decided that feelings were a luxury and practicality was the only honest response to the world pressed an extra ration into Aera's hands without being asked.

"For the stitches," Brea said.

Aera almost said she didn't need it. She took it instead. It was lentil soup, warm and slightly over-salted, and she ate it sitting on the ground beside a wagon wheel, alone, which was how she preferred most things.

Two hours into first watch, Elan came and sat nearby. He did not speak. He had his journal out and was making notes, occasionally glancing up at the stars. She let him stay because his presence was quiet and the silence between them was the comfortable kind not the kind that needed filling.

After a while, she said, "What are you writing?"

"What happened today. The ambush. How you moved. The specific angle of the dry riverbed and the approximate time before the river reversed course based on the mud saturation." He paused. "Also the soup, because Brea's soup deserves documentation."

She snorted. It surprised her the sound, the involuntariness of it. He looked up and smiled, not triumphantly, just honestly, the smile of someone who had wanted to make her do that and was glad it had worked.

"I'm going to keep writing," he said. "Even when things are bad. Especially when things are bad. Somebody has to."

She didn't answer. But she stayed on watch until he went to sleep, and she did not ask him to stop writing.

CHAPTER 4

THE WITNESS

He had not intended to come this far.

Elan Marsh had taken the mapping contract because it paid more than his last three jobs combined and because the Guild had been politely clear that his continued membership depended on completing commissions in geographies that were not Speria's library district, which was comfortable and also not expanding the archive in any meaningful direction. He had not taken it to become anyone's witness. He had not taken it to watch history happen.

He was, on the third day of travel, beginning to understand that what he intended and what was actually happening to him were operating on completely separate tracks.

She Sela, she called herself, though he noticed she paused before saying it, the way people pause before saying a name that isn't quite theirs moved through the world differently from anyone he had observed before. Not dramatically. Not in the way of stories, where the dangerous person announced themselves through posture and significant looks. She moved like someone who had made a calculation about every object within reach and filed the result away so efficiently that the calculation itself was invisible. She knew

where each of the three guards was at any moment. She knew the schedule of the watch before anyone stated it. She ate, rested, and maintained her equipment with the precision of someone for whom survival was a technical problem rather than an emotional one.

But she had laughed at the soup comment. That one involuntary snort and it was involuntary, he had watched it surprise her told him something that all the competence could not, which was that somewhere inside the technical problem-solver there was a person who had once laughed easily and had largely stopped and still occasionally forgot to stop it.

He wrote this down. Not the conclusion the evidence. A cartographer does not mark conclusions on maps. He marks what he observed, what the terrain revealed, and lets the reader draw the shape.

On the evening of the third day, outside a trading post that smelled of tallow and old timber, he watched her do something that changed his understanding of who she was. A woman at the post local, weathered, holding a child on her hip and nothing in her eyes that belonged to a person who had recently slept was being told by the post-master that her credit was no good and her husband's debt was now hers and the supplies she had come for would not be given.

Sela was not involved in this exchange. She was thirty feet away, reviewing the next day's route with Osh, her back to the scene.

Then she stopped reviewing.

She turned her head slightly. Then she said, without looking up from the map:

"Osh. Settle the woman's account. Add it to mine."

Osh stared. "That's that's not a small"

"Add it to mine," she said again, in the exact same tone. Not kinder. Not firmer. The same.

He settled the account. The woman took her supplies and left. Sela went back to the map.

Elan wrote it down, and then sat for a while considering what he had written, because the gesture was notable not because it was dramatic it wasn't, it was almost inaudible but because of the care she had taken to make it invisible. She could have said something. Made it a moment. Instead she had engineered it so that the woman could take the help without the indignity of being visibly helped.

He had worked with many people across many commissions. He had observed generosity, cruelty, cowardice, and ingenuity in roughly equal measure. He had not before observed someone who was generous with surgical precision.

That night, after camp was made and Osh was asleep and the guards were arguing cheerfully about something he couldn't follow, he asked her,

quietly:

"Do you do that often?"

She did not pretend not to know what he meant. That was another thing about her: she did not maintain social fictions that served no practical purpose.

"When I can afford it," she said.

"And when you can't?"

A pause. "I remember the amount. I pay it somewhere else, some other time, some other person."

He wrote that down too.

Somewhere in the following hour, in the space between writing and reading back what he had written, he made a decision he didn't quite examine directly the way you avoid looking at a flame straight on because you want to keep seeing it. He was going to keep following this woman. Not for the commission. Not for the Guild. Because he had a feeling, the specific nervous warm feeling of standing at the top of something very large and seeing the shape of it for the first time, that wherever she was going, the record of it was going to matter.

He didn't sleep well. He was too busy making notes.

I never asked her permission. This is the one thing about what followed that I cannot defend to myself, and I have been trying for years. I can only say: someone had to watch. The world needed a witness more than she needed a stranger's courtesy. I tell myself this. Some nights, it is enough.

CHAPTER 5

THE THREAD THAT MOVES

She noticed the thread on the fourth night.

They had camped at the edge of a Loom-bleed zone she could feel it before she could see it, the way the air thickened slightly, the way time became slightly uncertain at the edges of her attention. The bleed zones were not rare in Exilium. The Fracture had been particularly active out here, where the land was thin and the sky was close and there was nothing much between the world and whatever lay beneath it.

She left camp at the second hour. Technically she was checking the perimeter. In practice she walked toward the bleed zone until the air changed texture and the zone opened before her a suspended shimmer about thirty feet across, inside which yesterday was replaying on a loop. She could see it faintly: a figure crossing this exact stretch of ground at a slightly different angle, the ghost of a footprint that hadn't been made yet when the impression was captured.

The zone always made her slightly nauseous, the way looking at someone else's glasses made her eyes water. But the threads were beautiful here.

She had not let herself look at them, not properly, in almost two years. She looked now, standing at the zone's edge, far enough from camp that no one would see.

The Loom's threads were everywhere if you had Veilborn blood, but they were faint in most places filaments, suggestions, the grammar of the world seen sideways through the corner of your mind. In a bleed zone they were brighter. More present. The Fracture thinned the barrier between what was and what the Loom said should be, and the threads showed through like light through cracked ice.

She watched them. She had not let herself do this. It felt like sitting down after a very long time standing, the specific relief of it that is also a warning: you might not get up again.

One thread near the zone's center was different. It was thicker than the others, and it was dying she could tell from the color, the way it was losing its luminosity in stages, the fraying at the edges that meant something the thread was supposed to anchor was coming undone. She had seen threads die before. They were always unpleasant. They left a quality of absence behind them that you could feel if you stood close enough.

She did not intend to reach for it. Her hand moved anyway.

A small adjustment not a fix, she told herself, just a touch, just to see and the thread responded. It reached back. Not with intent. Not with anything

she could call sentience. But the fraying thread oriented toward her touch the way a wound orients toward heat: with intensity, with exposure, with the threat of opening further.

She pulled her hand back. The thread held the orientation for three seconds more, then returned to its dying.

She stood very still.

She had never had a thread reach back. She had touched threads before, minor ones, in small desperate moments she told herself did not count. They had responded. They had never reached.

She walked back to camp without looking behind her. She checked the perimeter with the systematic care of someone who needed to focus on something concrete and finite. She sat beside the embers of the fire and watched them breathe.

Elan was awake, she saw he was often awake when he should have been sleeping, another thing she had catalogued and not mentioned. He was watching her from across the dead fire with the face she was learning to recognize as his thinking face: not judgment, just observation, the cartographer noting an unusual feature of the terrain.

She almost told him. Instead she said, "Get some sleep. We move at dawn."

And he put his journal down and did, because he understood, already, which questions she would not answer.

She did not sleep. She sat beside the embers and thought about a thread that had reached back and what it meant that the Loom was doing things she had never seen a Loom thread do, and she thought: this is going to go badly. This is going to go badly in a specific direction and I am somehow already in the path of it.

She thought this, and she did not leave. She was not sure, even now, whether that decision was courage or something simpler and harder to name.

CHAPTER 6

THE STRANGER ARRIVES

He came from the east, which was the wrong direction.

The east was bad land. Loom-bleed terrain that went for days without thinning, salt crust over marsh, the kind of ground that swallowed a horse to the knee and let it go reluctantly. Nobody came from the east unless they had been pushed there or had gone there deliberately, and both options implied the kind of history that required either caution or a very particular question.

He was on foot, which meant his horse was gone, which meant several things none of them simple. He walked with the even, measured stride of someone who had decided that the distance between where they were and where they needed to be was a technical problem rather than a discouraging one. He had two bags. He had a coat that had been good quality six months ago. He had the kind of face that was difficult to age not young, not old, something in between that was more about what he had seen than how long he had lived.

She was watching him from the supply wagon when he entered the caravan's range. The three guards had seen him too and were doing the thing

guards do when they see a single approaching man who is clearly not a threat: visible alertness staged mostly for the merchant's benefit.

He stopped at a respectful distance and addressed Osh, which was correct he had identified the person in charge within about ten seconds of approach, also correct.

"I'm heading toward Speria," he said. "I can pay for the escort, or I can work for it. I'm useful in the ways you'd expect from someone who just crossed the eastern marsh."

Osh turned immediately to Sela, which was the wisest thing Osh had done in four days. She climbed down from the wagon and walked to where the man stood, because she wanted to look at him properly, and she wanted him to see her looking. People reacted usefully when they understood they were being assessed. They either got defensive or they got straightforward, and both versions told you something.

He got straightforward. He met her assessment without either performing confidence or retreating from it. He had very still eyes not calm-still, which she associated with people who had learned not to feel things but steady-still, the eyes of someone who had felt a great many things and arrived at a position on each of them and was not currently in the market for new positions.

"Former Loom-scholar?" she said, reading it from the coat and the bags and the precise way he was controlling his breathing after a long walk.

A flicker of something. "Former."

"You're heading to Speria."

"Yes."

"Alone."

"Until now, apparently."

She studied him. He had a ring on his right hand iron, worked in a pattern she recognized in the way you recognize something from a dream: not clearly, not with any specific memory attached, just the feeling of prior acquaintance. She looked at it for one, two, three seconds. She did not mention it.

"Name," she said.

"Sorin."

"Sorin what?"

A pause that was not uncertainty. He knew his surname. He was deciding something.

"Marsh," he said. "Sorin Marsh."

From behind her, Elan made a surprised sound and then immediately covered it with a cough. Sorin's eyes moved to him briefly, and there was something in that glance she could not read recognition would have been the

wrong word. Acknowledgment, maybe. The look of someone noting a landmark.

"Useful how?" she asked.

"Navigation in Loom-bleed terrain. Medical basics. I can take a watch. I don't sleep much."

"Why?"

He looked at her directly. "I have a lot to think about."

She made a decision she could not entirely justify and allocated two seconds to not justifying it.

"You'll take second watch. You carry your own weight. If you do anything that puts this group in danger, I won't give you warning before I act. Understood?"

"Understood."

He joined the caravan. That night at camp, she sat across the fire from him and watched him watch the Loom-bleed shimmer at the horizon not with curiosity, not exactly, but with the focused attention of someone cross-referencing what they were seeing against something they already knew.

She watched him watching. She thought about the ring. She did not ask about it. She would spend a long time not asking about it.

He gave my surname. I do not know why. Sorin Ben-Shalem that was what he was, though I would not know it for months. But he gave Marsh, which is mine, and looked at me when he did it, and I had the feeling he was placing something in my keeping without telling me what it was.

CHAPTER 7

THE UNSAID RECOGNITION

On the seventh morning, she woke before everyone else and found Sorin already awake, sitting at the edge of the campsite with a cup of water, watching the salt flats go gold.

She could have turned back. The decent thing, the social thing, would have been to give him the solitude he'd chosen. She sat down instead, at the distance of someone who wasn't crowding him, and they were quiet together for a while in the way that was becoming, she noticed, their particular kind of quiet. Not the silence of strangers. Something else.

After a while, he said: "You saw a thread reach back."

She did not answer immediately. She looked at the horizon.

"Don't explain it to me," she said. "I know what I saw."

"I'm not explaining it. I'm saying I know it happened."

She turned to look at him then. He was looking at his water cup. She had spent several days cataloguing the ways he was careful how he chose words, how he angled himself, the specific quality of his silences and she had arrived at a conclusion she had been trying to unseat for two days, which was

that he was careful in the particular way of someone who already knew more than they were saying.

"How do you know?" she asked.

He looked up at her. His eyes, in the early light, were very tired. Not sleep-tired. The other kind. "I know you have a scar on your left shoulder," he said, "in the shape of a thread. I know what it means. And I know you are not the last."

She had her knife in her hand before she finished deciding to draw it. She was fast she was very fast and he did not flinch. He just looked at the blade and then at her face and waited.

She held it there. "Who are you?"

"Someone who needs to get to Speria," he said. "The same as you. We have the same problem, Aera. And before you tell me that's not your name"

"It's not."

"It is," he said, quietly and with the specific gentleness of someone delivering something that will hurt regardless of how it's delivered. "It's the one they gave you. The one that's yours whether you use it or not."

She sat with the knife between them for a long moment. The salt flats were fully gold now, the light sliding across them without mercy. In the distance, the shapes of the bleed zones were pale and still.

"Not knowing is worse," she said finally.

"I know."

"If you're a threat to this group"

"I'm not."

"If you lie to me"

"I won't lie to you," he said. He said it the way people say things they have said a great many times to themselves before they say them to someone else. Not a promise. A fact he had already settled. "I may not tell you everything yet. But I won't lie to you."

She resheathed the knife. He nodded, once, as though she had confirmed something. Then he drank his water and looked back at the horizon, and she looked at his hand resting on his knee and the ring on it that she recognized from a dream she could never quite hold in waking memory, and she thought: this is the person I have been avoiding knowing about for years, and I have no idea yet in which direction that understanding goes.

She did not mention the ring. He did not explain it. They sat in the gold morning until the camp began to stir and the moment dissolved into the ordinary noise of breakfast and pack-up and the business of another day's crossing.

She went quiet for three seconds when she saw the ring. I have been thinking about those three seconds since Aeturnis. I think she knew. Not consciously.

But somewhere below where conscious things live, she already knew, and her body registered it before her mind was ready to. Three seconds. I wrote them down and didn't understand them until much later. That's the whole job, really.

CHAPTER 8

THE UNEASY ALLIANCE

The three of them left Osh and his caravan at the Exilium junction Osh heading east to avoid the Thornguard checkpoints with his now considerably lighter purse and his considerably heavier relief, and Aera, Sorin, and Elan heading northwest on foot toward the long road to Speria.

The dynamic among the three of them was, Elan thought, the kind of thing you could study for a year and still not have a complete vocabulary for. Sorin moved at the front, navigating by something he did not explain sometimes by landmarks, sometimes by what looked like an internal compass that had nothing to do with direction and everything to do with something else. Elan moved in the middle, which is where he always ended up, not by design but by temperament. Aera moved at the rear, which she did deliberately and which she would have maintained even if someone had pointed it out.

The road was unpopulated for most of the first day, which gave them a lot of time to not talk. Sorin had a way of offering information in carefully measured amounts, as if each piece of it was calibrated to what she was ready to receive and not a syllable more. This irritated her. She was accustomed to irritation from men who thought they were managing her, and she was

accustomed to correcting it, but with him it was harder because the calibration was not condescension it was something more like care, and she did not have a good response to care that was this frustratingly well-timed.

"Tell me what you know about the Thornguard," she said, at the midday rest, because she needed to talk about something she could handle.

Sorin looked up from the map he'd been consulting. "More than I should."

"More than you should, meaning you've encountered them before, or more than you should meaning you had access you shouldn't have had?"

He considered this with the gravity of someone weighing a genuinely good question. "Both, at different times."

"Are they looking for you?"

"They're looking for a category of person I happen to be. Specifically." He glanced at her. "They're looking for the same category you happen to be. That's why Speria is the right destination. Free city, independent judiciary, complicated history with the Realm. It's the one place that requires documented cause before they act."

Elan said, "Have you been to Speria before?"

Something moved across Sorin's face that was gone before it was fully present. "Yes," he said. "Several times."

"It's wonderful," Elan said, with the confidence of someone who had been there twice and loved it both times. "The market on Vesper Street has this baker"

"Elan," Aera said.

"Right. Not the moment."

She almost smiled. He was getting better at reading the room. She decided not to discourage it.

That afternoon they came to a place where the road widened at a crossroads and someone had erected a signpost that pointed, respectively, toward Speria, Ruina, the Furorem, and a fourth direction that simply read: THE WASTES. As if anyone needed to be told.

Elan sketched it in his journal. Sorin studied the southeast road for a long moment before turning northwest.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Evidence of recent use," he said. "Thornguard sends advance scouts before their main body. If there's been traffic from the southeast in the last three days, we adjust our route."

"And?"

"Three days. Maybe four. We have time, but not much." He looked at her. "Can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

He paused. Then: "When was the last time you used your ability?"

The question sat in the air between them with the specific weight of something that had been not-asked for a week. "Last week," she said. "The bleed zone. I touched a thread. It"

She stopped.

"Reached back," he said.

"I told you not to explain it."

"I'm not explaining it. I'm confirming it happened."

The difference mattered, she thought. She was not sure why it mattered, but it did. She looked at him for a long moment and decided not because she trusted him fully but because not deciding was beginning to feel like a choice she was making for the wrong reasons to tell him about the thread. What she had seen. How it had moved.

He listened without interrupting, which she noted. Then he said, "That means the Fracture is responding to your proximity. Which means we need to move faster."

"Responding how?"

A pause in which he was clearly deciding how much to say. He said the Loom did not want Veilborn blood active near a bleed zone right now. What she had experienced was the Loom registering her presence. Which meant other things would register it too.

She did not ask what other things. She would ask that question in full eventually. For now she said, "How much faster?"

"Double pace from tomorrow. I'll explain more at Speria."

She looked at him for a long moment. He looked back.

"You're going to be very frustrating to travel with," she said.

"I know," he said, and there was something in his voice that sounded, just faintly, like apology. "I know that."

CHAPTER 9

THE WORLD IS WRONG

The Loom-bleed zone began on the second day of double pace, which was either bad timing or causation, and she spent a while walking and considering which. It was larger than the one in the southern salt flats. It covered the road for almost half a mile, which meant going around added time they didn't have, and going through meant navigating a stretch of terrain where yesterday was visible in the air and the ground occasionally forgot where it was supposed to be.

Sorin walked into it first without hesitation, which told her he'd done it before. She followed. Elan followed her with the focused attention of someone who had decided that the only way through a frightening thing was to look at it directly and not stop moving.

Inside the zone, the light was wrong. Not dark wrong. It came from slightly the wrong angle, as though the sun had shifted a few degrees while they weren't watching. She could see the threads clearly here, brighter than they'd been in the southern flat, overlapping and complex. Some of them were fraying. She looked away.

Yesterday played in the air around them: fragments of travelers who had come this way the previous day, their ghost-shapes moving through the same space in the same direction, slightly translucent, slightly delayed. She passed through one and felt the brief cold of someone else's moment. The ghost was a woman with a market basket, moving briskly, completely unaware that she was haunting her own recent past.

Elan walked directly through a ghost-horse and made a small sound.

"Keep moving," Sorin said, not unkindly. "Don't follow them with your eyes."

"I'm trying not to." A pause. "This is extraordinary."

"It's a symptom," Sorin said. "The Fracture causes time to fold in localized areas. Bleed zones are where the fold is most visible. They're getting larger."

"How long have they been getting larger?"

"Since the Fracture." Another pause. "Faster in the last two years."

She was watching a thread that was running perpendicular to the road unusual, most threads ran in roughly predictable directions and flickering in a pattern she associated with proximity to a death event. Not recent. Old. This was a thread carrying the memory of something that had happened near here. She could feel it the way you feel barometric pressure change, in the back of your teeth and your ears.

"What died here?" she said.

Sorin looked at her. Then at the thread she was watching. His expression shifted the small shift of someone who has been anticipating a question and is now deciding how to answer it honestly.

"Veilborn," he said. "Thirty-one years ago. A family. Three members. They were found by advance scouts from Ruina before the Culling officially began. Unofficially, the Culling began here." He said it the way you state a fact that has been a fact for so long that the horror in it has calcified. Not without feeling. With too much feeling, packed too tightly to be visible. "The thread carries it. It doesn't let go of what happened near it."

She looked at the thread for another moment. It was fraying at the edges, losing coherence, reaching the end of whatever span it had been built to hold. She did not touch it.

They came out of the zone into ordinary afternoon light, and the contrast was strange the world outside seeming almost aggressively normal, the way normalcy feels like an insult immediately after confronting something that breaks it.

Elan sat down on a flat stone and opened his journal with hands that were only slightly unsteady.

"Can I ask," he said, after a while, "what happens when the bleed zones get large enough to overlap?"

Sorin and Aera looked at each other. It was the first time they had looked at each other for information rather than assessment, the first moment of the particular shorthand that develops between people who are navigating the same catastrophe from different vantage points.

"Nothing that has a clean name yet," Sorin said. "The word we'd use is: worse."

Elan wrote this down with the systematic patience of someone who had decided that the only response to impossible information was to record it precisely. She watched him write and thought: this is what a witness looks like. She had not had a witness before. She was not certain how she felt about having one now, except that the uncertainty was not the same as objection.

CHAPTER 10

FIRST BLOOD

The village was called something she wasn't told and would not find on any map Elan would later make. It was six hours out from Speria. It was on fire when they came over the rise.

The Thornguard were not brutal for pleasure. She had to keep reminding herself of this when watching them, because the brutality was so precise and so thorough that it looked like enthusiasm when you saw it at speed. It was not. It was method. And method, she had found, was in some ways harder to resist than enthusiasm because it did not tire and it did not hesitate and it moved according to a plan that had already accounted for interference.

There were eight of them that she could see immediately. Probably two she couldn't. They were moving house to house with the efficiency of people executing a list: this building cleared, this one burned, this person relocated, this one She stopped cataloguing.

"Don't," Sorin said from beside her, very quietly.

"I know," she said.

"If we go in, we announce ourselves to the Thornguard network. They report back. Every checkpoint between here and Speria gets our description."

"I know."

She knew. She knew all of it. She knew the tactical argument in its entirety and she was considering it seriously and she was watching a man she did not know lead a woman and two children out of a burning building while a Thornguard soldier told him, in a calm carrying voice, that resistance was inadvisable.

She went over the rise.

Elan made a sound behind her. She did not look back.

The next several minutes were not the kind of thing you described in complete sentences. She moved. The Thornguard responded. They were well-trained much better than the ambush bandits, better than anything she had encountered in Exilium and there were more of them than eight, she had been right about that, there were ten and possibly twelve and she was adapting on the fly to a situation she had entered without a plan because she was doing this and the plan would have to come from her body rather than her mind.

Sorin was beside her. She had not heard him follow. He fought differently than she did more economical, less inventive, with the specific efficiency of someone who had done this before in iterations she didn't understand yet. They moved between the buildings, back to back for one

moment, and she thought: I have fought beside this person before, and then immediately dismissed it as adrenaline.

The village was mostly cleared by the time the Thornguard retreated not routed, retreated, there was a difference, they withdrew in good order with two of their number supported and the clear intention of reporting and returning in greater force. She let them go. She stood in the street with a split lip and three new bruises she would find tomorrow and blood on her hands that was not all hers, and she looked at the village, which was still burning in places and silent in the particular way of places where people had just been very afraid.

The man with the woman and children was looking at her. He had the expression of someone who had been saved by something they weren't sure was safe. She understood the expression. She didn't blame him for it.

From behind her, Elan said her name her real name, and she turned, startled, because she had not told him and his face was wrong. He was pale and he was looking at something past her, and she turned again and found the minor character who had eaten Brea's soup sitting against the wall of the nearest building with his hand pressed to his side and an expression on his face that was the peculiar calm of someone who has already done their accounting.

He was a young man. Twenty, maybe twenty-two. He had been funny at meals and terrible at cards and had a habit of humming while he worked that

she had found irritating and had stopped noticing and would now apparently find she missed.

She crossed to him. She knelt.

"I thought I was out of the way," he said.

"I know."

"Did we"

"Yes," she said. "The village is clear."

He nodded. He said something else she didn't catch because his voice was already going soft, and then he was quiet, and then she was kneeling in the street of an unnamed village with her hand over his and the world happening around her in a way that felt briefly very far away.

Sorin's hand came down on her shoulder. He said nothing. She did not look up.

After a moment she stood, and she was herself again, or the version of herself that she allowed in daylight, and she looked at the road ahead.

"We move," she said. "Now. Before they come back."

Nobody argued. Elan was writing, rapidly, with wet eyes and very steady hands. She let him write. She led them onto the road toward Speria. She did not look back at the village. She did not allow herself to look back. The world was going to keep demanding things from her. She was going to keep paying. That was the arrangement.

His name was Corren. I am writing it here because someone should write it. Twenty-one years old. He hummed while he worked. He died in an unnamed village six hours outside Speria because Aera Bat-Shalem decided that a person in danger was worth the announcement of herself to a Thornguard intelligence network. I have thought about that decision many times. I cannot tell you it was wrong.

CHAPTER 11

THE AFTERMATH

They did not talk about Corren that night, because there was nothing to say about Corren that would make the village less burned or his hand less cold, and Aera had an absolute and merciless relationship with the things that couldn't be changed.

They made camp in a hollow between two rises, which provided cover from the road and a clear sightline from the higher of the two rises for whoever took first watch. She took first watch, Sorin second, Elan third. Elan would fall asleep on third watch within forty minutes, which both she and Sorin had already established was simply how Elan worked and was not worth correcting.

The fire was small and well-screened. She sat above it on the rise and watched the horizon and thought about Thornguard intelligence networks and how long they had before Speria's gate became complicated.

Sorin came up at the watch change and stood beside her before taking the position. He was quiet for a moment. Then he said: "You're not going to ask me to tell you it was worth it."

"No."

"Because you already know it doesn't work that way."

"Because asking someone to tell me a thing is true doesn't make it true. Corren's dead either way. The village is burned either way." She looked at the horizon. "The only question is whether we can use the announcement before they use it."

He was quiet for another moment. Then: "We can. In Speria." He looked at her. "Tell me what Speria gives us."

He sat down on the rise beside her unusual, he generally maintained the physical distance she preferred, and she noted the deviation and looked at the road.

"Resources. Access. The kind of people who are cataloguing what the Loom is doing and would like very much to know that a living Veilborn is not only conscious of her ability but capable of things the Thornguard network doesn't have a classification for yet."

"The thread reaching back."

"Among other things."

She turned to look at him. He was looking at the road, and his profile in the firelight was the profile of someone carrying something heavy enough that they had learned to redistribute the weight without showing it.

"What are the other things?" she said.

He looked at her. He considered. He said, "You're the only one left, Aera. And the Loom knows it. Veilborn ability isn't just personal it's relational to the Loom's state. When the bloodline was full, the Loom had multiple I suppose you could call them anchors. Distributed. Multiple people touching the threads, multiple points of contact. Now there's one. You."

He paused. "You're not just the last. You're the Loom's only remaining point of contact with its own repair. That's why the thread reached back. That's why the bleed zones register your presence. The Loom is" He stopped.

"The Loom is what?"

Another pause. Longer. "It's trying to find you. Not with intent. The way a wound finds heat."

She thought about this for a while. The fire below them breathed quietly. The horizon was empty and dark and very far away.

"That's a lot to put on one person," she said at last.

"Yes."

"I notice you're not apologizing for it."

"Would it help?"

She considered this genuinely. "No," she decided.

"Then I'm not apologizing for it."

She almost laughed. The impulse surprised her not the humor, she had always had that, it was one of the things that had survived everything else but

the ease of it, the fact that it was there at all in the context of this conversation. She went down to camp. She slept for four hours, which was longer than she expected and shorter than she needed, and when she woke up Elan was indeed asleep on watch with his journal open in his lap, and she sat beside the dead fire in the dark and looked at the stars that Elan had told her were different from the ones over Ruina. They were. She had never noticed before.

ACT TWO

SPERIA TO DOLORATH

The Architecture of Breaking

CHAPTER 12

THE CITY OF HOPE

Speria happened gradually and then all at once. First there were more people on the road families, merchants, single travelers with the particular purposefulness of people heading somewhere specific. Then there were smaller settlements, connected to the road by worn paths, and vegetable plots that were actually producing vegetables, which after Aridus's failed crops and Exilium's bare flats felt faintly miraculous. Then there were the walls. And then, inside them, there was noise.

Speria was loud. She had forgotten how cities were loud not the violent noise of catastrophe but the ordinary noise of a lot of people doing a lot of different things within earshot of each other, cooking smells and arguments and a man three streets over laughing at something she couldn't see. The language she heard at the gate was six different ones in under a minute, which Elan greeted with the specific delight of a person for whom other languages represented information.

She stood at the gate and let the city wash over her. She had not let a place do that to her in a very long time. She was usually registering threats and calculating exits and noting the position of people who might matter. She still did all of those things. But under them, running quietly like a minor key, was

something else: the recognition of warmth, actual warmth, the warmth of a city that was alive and full and not on fire.

Sorin was watching her. She caught him doing it and he looked away. She catalogued this and did not address it.

They were stopped at the gate by a guard whose uniform announced that he was Sperian militia and whose expression announced that he had been doing this job long enough to have seen a great deal and had opinions about most of it. He looked at their papers she had papers, she always had papers and then at Sorin's papers, which were impeccably forged and which she recognized as such from the quality of the forgery. And then at Elan's Guild credential, which was real and which the guard treated with slightly more respect than the others.

"What's your business in Speria?" he asked.

"Mapping commission," Elan said, promptly and with the confidence of someone who had been saying this for a long time and had found it generally sufficient. "My colleagues are my security detail."

The guard looked at her. She looked back. He decided that this was not a thing he wanted to investigate further. They went through the gate.

The man standing on the other side had his arms crossed and his back to a pillar and an expression that was approximately four different unfavorable assessments happening simultaneously. He was tall, ex-military in the specific

way of someone who still held the posture but had lost the rank, with a face that had been rearranged once by something hard and had settled into a new configuration that was, she conceded privately, arresting.

He looked at her for two seconds. "Aera Bat-Shalem," he said.

She stopped. The city noise continued around them.

"That," she said carefully, "is not a name I use."

"It's the only name that matters." He uncrossed his arms. "I'm Davan Cole. Private security, Speria western quarter. You've been announced by the Thornguard network as a person of interest with a Veilborn designation. Which means you've got about three days before the network reaches someone in this city who's not me and actually acts on it."

A long silence in which she was calculating and he was waiting.

"Who told you?" she said.

"Sources I don't discuss." He looked at Sorin briefly. "Three of you. One Veilborn, one Loom-scholar, one man with a journal who I'm told doesn't know when to stop writing."

Elan raised a hand. "Guilty."

Davan looked back at her. The assessment in his eyes was frank and not unkind, but it was the assessment of someone who had long since stopped performing social courtesy because it cost too much. "I can move you somewhere in the city that's not on the Thornguard's usual check-list," he said.

"In exchange for information about what you can actually do and what you're planning. I don't work for free and I don't work blind."

"Neither do I," she said.

"Then we'll get along fine."

She had an argument ready. She looked at him for one more moment and did not use it. "Lead," she said. "And you can ask your questions when we're somewhere the gate guard can't hear them."

He nodded. He turned and walked into the city. She followed, and Sorin followed her, and Elan followed Sorin while writing something in his journal and almost walking into a vegetable cart, which he avoided at the last moment with the agility of someone who had learned to write without looking at his feet.

She watched Davan's back as he moved through the crowd: unhurried, aware of the people around him, navigating the market street with the same distribution of attention she used herself. She noted this. She did not note anything else about him. Not yet.

CHAPTER 13

DAVAN

He had a room above a cobbler's shop in Speria's western quarter, which was not where a person of his former rank would have been living and which he had never once invited comment on. He had three other rooms he used: a storage space near the north gate, a meeting place behind a restaurant on the Vesper market street, and a cellar beneath the Speria militia barracks that the official militia was apparently unaware he had access to.

She mapped all of these in the first day, not because she expected to need them but because mapping the spaces a person used was the fastest way to understand what kind of person they were.

Davan Cole was a person who maintained options. Several of them. Without drawing attention to the maintenance. She respected this in a technical sense and found it personally suspicious, which she recognized was not entirely fair but was also not something she was in a position to stop.

He answered her questions in the order she asked them, which was not the order most people answered questions because most people deflected toward whatever version of the question they found easier. He did not deflect. His answers were precise and occasionally more honest than she expected, as when she asked about his regiment and he said, without hesitation or

softening: "Dissolved. Officially. Unofficially, most of them were killed at Vigil three years ago. I wasn't there."

"Why weren't you there?"

"I was removed from command two weeks before. Insubordination."

"Against whom?"

A pause that was not uncertainty. Something careful. "An order that would have required me to do something I couldn't do."

She waited. He did not clarify further, and she understood that this was the question she would not get answered yet, and also that the fact that he had given her the shape of it without the content was itself a kind of honesty.

The tension between them was not unfriendly. It was the tension of two people who operated on similar principles wariness, efficiency, the preference for useful information over social comfort and who were therefore suspicious of each other in a way that was almost collegial.

On the second evening, she couldn't sleep and walked the market street at the hour when the stalls were closed and the city was quiet, and she found the bakery Elan had mentioned closed, dark, fragrant with what had been baked that morning. She stood outside it and ate a piece of bread she'd bought somewhere else and felt, briefly and without planning to, something close to normal.

Davan appeared from an alley. She did not flinch she had heard him two seconds before he appeared, which was close to the limit of her range and meant he was better at quiet movement than almost anyone she'd encountered. She noted this with the particular attention it deserved.

"Couldn't sleep," he said. "Neither can you, apparently."

He stood beside her with his hands in his pockets, looking at the closed stalls. She had the impression he did this regularly walked the city at night, knew its breathing, checked on it the way a person checks on something they've appointed themselves guardian of without exactly meaning to.

"The boy in the medical ward," she said.

He went still for a second. "What about him?"

She had found out about the medical ward from Elan, who had found out from the militia surgeon, who had mentioned it in passing as an example of civilian cooperation in the Speria medical network. There was a child eight or nine, fever, respiratory infection who had been receiving overnight visits from the private security consultant of the western quarter for the last five days.

"You don't know his family," she said. It was not a question.

"No."

"Just sick. Just there."

"Just there." He looked at the bakery. "He reminded me of" He stopped. Then: "Someone."

She ate the last of her bread. The night was cool and ordinary around them.

"I had a sister," she said. She had not planned to say this. She said it anyway because the bread was eaten and the night was quiet and he had told her something true, and exchange was a law older than the Loom.

"Had," he said.

"She was young. I was twelve. I don't" She stopped. She started again. "I don't talk about it. I'm not sure why I mentioned it."

A pause in which he was not filling the silence with the social things people fill silences with, not offering sympathy or comparison or the linguistic approximations of comfort. He just stood there, and she stood there, and the city breathed around them.

"Thank you," he said finally. "For telling me."

She looked at him. He was looking at the street. She went back to the room above the cobbler's. She did not think about the conversation. She thought about Thornguard intelligence networks and the three-day window Davan had given them and what Sorin had not yet told her about why Speria specifically, why this city, why now. She thought about those things. She thought about them carefully and at length. She was very thorough about it.

I found him at dawn in the medical ward. He had been there through the night. When I came through the door, he looked at me with the expression of a man who has been caught doing something he cannot explain to his own satisfaction, which was strange, because it was a perfectly good thing. He was dismissive. Awkward. He practically pushed past me on his way out. Aera asked me later what I had found. I said: nothing useful. I was wrong. That was the moment. None of us knew it then.

CHAPTER 14

THE HORIZON BURNS

The news came on the fifth day, which was one day earlier than Davan had predicted, which was not reassuring.

Saraph Dorn had crossed the Furorem. She heard it from three sources within the hour: a militia runner who came through the western quarter at a speed that told you everything before the words did; a merchant at the market who had come in from the eastern road that morning and was telling everyone who would listen; and Davan, who appeared at the door of her room with his expression set in the particular way of someone delivering news they would prefer not to have.

"How far?" she asked.

"Four days at campaign pace. Probably three if he pushes." He came in and stood with his back to the window. "He's not targeting Speria specifically. He never targets free cities directly it creates the wrong kind of attention from the Realm's independent magistrates. But he's marching south, and Speria is south, and his supply line runs through the Aridus fields, which means"

"Which means we're in the path."

"We're in the path."

She looked at the window behind him. Through it, the city was doing what cities did when threat approached: continuing, mostly, with the specific quality of energy that meant people were continuing harder, more deliberately, as if normalcy could be maintained by effort. She had seen cities do this before. She knew how it ended.

Sorin was in the doorway. She had not heard him come up the stairs, which she noted as a failure of attention and stored for later consideration.

"We leave tomorrow," he said. "For where?" Davan asked, not aggressively, with the genuine logistics-focus of someone thinking about supply and route.

"North." Sorin looked at her. "There are things in the northern reaches I need to show you. We've been in Speria long enough to stabilize. We've been here long enough."

She heard the thing he wasn't saying: we've been here long enough that I'm afraid of what you're starting to feel for this place.

She went to the window. The city below was Vesper Street at the midday height, full and loud and improbably alive. A woman was arguing cheerfully with a vendor about the weight of her purchase. A group of children were chasing something around a corner a dog, she thought, some indeterminate small panicked animal. An old man was sitting in a doorway eating something

and looking at the sky with the expression of someone who has arranged their relationship with the sky very satisfactorily over many decades.

She watched this. She let herself watch it for thirty seconds longer than she would usually have allowed.

Then she turned from the window.

"Tomorrow," she said. "I want the northern route checked before dawn. I want supplies for ten days minimum. And I want" She stopped.

"What?" Sorin said.

She looked back at the window once more. At the city she was going to leave. At the city that was going to be here when they were not, dealing with whatever Saraph Dorn's march meant for free cities that were inconveniently in the path of necessity.

"Nothing," she said. "Tomorrow."

That night she went up to the city walls the southern walls, the ones that faced the direction Saraph was coming from and stood at the parapet in the cold and looked at the horizon. Sorin came up after an interval. He did not stand beside her. He stood slightly behind, at the distance he had maintained since the beginning.

The horizon was dark except for one spot to the southeast, very far away, where the sky was slightly more orange than the night could account for.

"Tell me what you actually know," she said. "Not what you're deciding I'm ready for. What you actually know."

A silence. Then: "More than I should."

She looked at his face in the wall-light, and on it there was something she could not name yet but would name later, sitting in Dolorath with warm ground under her feet and everything she had ever held already gone. It was goodbye. He had been saying goodbye to this city since before they arrived, because he had been here before, in versions of this story she did not know about yet, and he knew what was coming.

He knew what was coming, and he had come anyway.

She did not know yet what to do with that. She turned back to the fires. "Tomorrow," she said.

CHAPTER 15

LEAVING SAFETY

The morning they left Speria, Elan ate three servings of breakfast. She watched him do it without comment. She understood. You ate when you had food you trusted, at a table with a roof over it, in a city that had not yet learned it was going to fall. You ate three servings of breakfast because the body knew things the mind had not yet been told.

She had half a bowl of oat porridge and a piece of flatbread and two cups of weak tea, which was more than she usually ate in the morning and less than she usually wanted, and she sat at the table and watched the room.

Davan sat down across from her. She had not expected this. He had been clipped and operational since the Thornguard news, which was appropriate and which she appreciated, but he had also maintained the distance of someone who has said something personal and is now carefully not drawing attention to having said it.

"You don't have to take me," he said. Quiet. Factual. The tone of someone presenting an option they expect to have declined.

She looked at him. "I know."

"I'm a liability after Vigil. My name is in Thornguard records. If they cross-reference"

"Davan." She picked up her cold tea. "I know."

He went quiet. She drank the tea.

"The boy in the ward," she said, without deciding to. "Did he get better?"

A pause. Then: "Yes."

"Good."

"He asked about the soldier lady." He said it without inflection but his ears went slightly red, which she noted. "Apparently you visited once when I wasn't there."

"I was passing."

"He said you showed him something. A light. Small."

She had shown the child one thread a bright one, low-consequence, harmless, the kind that carried nothing more serious than the fact that the room was structurally sound and the fever would break by morning. She had done it in thirty seconds and told him it was a trick, a city thing, nothing special. He had been too ill to do much more than watch it with wide eyes. She had not mentioned it to anyone.

She looked at Davan. He was looking at his hands.

"You can come," she said. "Tactical value, yes. I know your history with Vigil. I also know that you identified me at the gate before any of the others did, which means you have sources I don't have and information I'll need. So you can come. But" She waited until he looked at her. "You understand what we're going toward. I'm not going to be able to protect you from it. I'm not going to be able to protect anyone from it. If that's"

"I know," he said.

"Let me finish. If that's not a condition you can work in, say now. I would rather you said now."

He looked at her with the steadiness that she had spent two weeks cataloguing and had arrived at a reluctant conclusion about, which was that Davan Cole was the kind of person who had been through enough that the frightening things had largely stopped being surprising, and what remained was just assessment.

"I've been working in conditions I can't control since Vigil," he said. "It hasn't changed what I decide to do. It won't now."

She nodded. She stood. She picked up her pack.

"Eat something before we go," she said. "Not three servings, but something."

CHAPTER 16

ARIDUS

The farmland began three hours north of Speria and continued, in various stages of failure, for two days.

She had read about the Aridus fields in the kind of abstract way you read about things that haven't happened in front of you yet. The Fracture's effect on agriculture, the crops failing in patterns that defied seasonal logic, the yields dropping across thirty years by margins that should have caused famine already and hadn't only because Speria's trade network was doing extraordinary invisible work to compensate. She had understood it intellectually. Walking through it was something else.

The fields were not empty. That was the part that was worse than empty would have been. They were full of things that had almost made it: stalks that had come up and gone wrong at the knee, grains that had formed and then shriveled without ripening, root vegetables pulled and found hollow inside. Workers were in the fields, because you worked the fields even when the fields were not working, because the alternative was to stop, and stopping felt like accepting.

She watched a woman dig up a row of potatoes with the steady patience of someone who has done this every year for decades and has not stopped believing that this row might be different from the last. Three of the potatoes she held up were good. Seven were not.

Davan walked beside her through this stretch. He did not comment on it. He did not need to. He had come from somewhere near here, she had gathered, from a family that had worked land like this, and the landscape was doing something to his face that she was not looking at directly because some things deserved their private space.

Elan was making notes. She let him make notes.

Sorin was leading them by whatever internal compass he used, and had been doing so with increasing specificity for the last hour, which she associated with something he had found on the road. She caught up to him.

"What are you seeing?"

"Bleed-patterns," he said. "Old ones. Someone has been through this route in the last three days. Multiple people. The thread-impressions are recent enough that I can track them."

"Thornguard?"

"Or scouts from Ruina's general intelligence. Either is a problem." He looked at her. "We should move faster."

They moved faster. The fields thinned toward the road's northern edge and the terrain became rockier. She was tracking the position of everyone in the group by sound and habit when Sorin stopped.

She stopped. Davan stopped. Elan walked three more steps before noticing.

Sorin had his head tilted at the angle that meant he was reading threads. Then he turned east. Then, very quietly: "Run."

She ran. The attack came from three directions simultaneously, which indicated Thornguard rather than general intelligence. Seven soldiers, good weapons. She was hit twice once in the shoulder, once across the leg, both non-critical, both painful and she hit back with the grim efficiency of someone who has stopped having conversations with adrenaline and just works. Davan was beside her on her left, and she found that his presence adjusted her tactics in ways she had not expected she knew where he was without looking, which was dangerous, which meant she trusted his positioning, which was a thing she had not decided to do and had apparently done anyway.

They broke the attack. Three Thornguard down, two fled, two more making a decision she watched happen across their faces the calculation of whether following was worth it and deciding it was not.

She stood in the field with blood from her shoulder making itself felt and looked at Sorin.

"Someone told them where we were," she said.

A silence between them. Then: "Yes."

"Someone in our group."

"Or someone who knew our route." He looked at her steadily. "Four people knew this route. Us, and whoever gave Davan the Thornguard intelligence in Speria."

She looked at Davan. He looked back at her with the expression of someone who has just done the same mathematics and has arrived at an answer he does not like.

"My source in Speria is clean," he said. "I've worked with her for three years."

"Then it's the route," she said. "We deviate." She looked north. "And we don't talk about routes in advance anymore. We decide at the turn."

Nobody argued. She pressed her hand to the shoulder wound and calculated how long they had before it needed attention and decided they had enough. They moved.

CHAPTER 17

THE BETRAYAL

She found out three days later, and the way she found out was by Sorin telling her, which was how she learned that he had known for longer than three days. He told her at dusk, beside a fire in a rocky hollow two hours east of the main road, while Davan was on perimeter and Elan was writing.

"It was Bera," he said.

She processed this. Bera was one of the three people in Speria's resistance network who had known their northern route. A woman of fifty, who had lost two sons to Thornguard action and had spent the last decade routing information through Speria's independent judiciary to document Saraph Dorn's campaign in a way that might eventually produce accountability.

"Why." Not a question. The word dropped flatly.

"She believes you're too dangerous to remain uncontrolled," Sorin said. "She's seen what Veilborn ability does at full strength in a Fracture-compromised environment. She's seen the bleed zones get larger. She thinks an active Veilborn heir, moving through Loom-bleed terrain with her ability registering"

"She thinks I'm making it worse."

"She thinks you could make it catastrophically worse. Without intending to." He looked at her. "She's not wrong about the mechanism. She's wrong about the conclusion."

She sat with this for a while. The fire was small and the hollow was cold and from somewhere on the perimeter she could hear Davan's footfall making its steady circuit.

"She turned us in," she said finally.

"Yes."

"Two people in my group nearly died."

"Yes."

"And she had a coherent argument."

"Yes."

She looked at the fire. The problem with a coherent argument, she thought, the specific corrosive problem of it, was that it didn't leave you anywhere clean to stand. Clean betrayal you could hate and file and move past. Ambiguous betrayal sat in you differently it asked questions you didn't want to be asking when you were trying to function.

"Do I make it worse?" she said.

"Not the way she thinks. What you do makes the Loom's damage more visible, not more extensive. You're not causing the Fracture. You're like a lamp held near a wound. The wound was already there."

"But I make it visible."

"Yes."

"And visible things attract attention."

"Yes."

She threw a stone into the fire. It hit and threw sparks and she watched them go.

"I hate that she wasn't wrong," she said.

"I know."

"It would be much easier if she was just wrong."

"That's the specific difficulty of a coherent betrayal," he said. "It corrodes differently."

She looked at him. He was watching the fire. He had said the thing she was thinking before she had finished thinking it, which was happening more frequently, and which she was not certain how to categorize.

"Does she know you know?" she said.

"She knows someone in your group survived the Aridus attack and therefore knows the attack was coordinated. She doesn't know what I know. She doesn't know that I can read the threads well enough to trace which direction information traveled before it got there."

"Are you going to tell Davan?"

A pause. "Yes. Not tonight. When he's ready to hear something that complicates his intelligence network without making him do something we'll regret."

Davan's footfall completed its circuit and began again. She listened to it. Steady. Reliable. She had not intended to learn its rhythm and had learned it anyway.

"All right," she said.

She went to bed angry and woke up having processed the anger into something colder and more useful, which was what she had always done with feelings she couldn't afford. Corren was dead. The unnamed village was burned. Bera had a coherent argument and had used it to try to have her captured. The sky was too warm for the season and the Loom was looking for her. She got up. She made her pack. She told no one she was angry. That was the arrangement.

CHAPTER 18

SEPARATION

The second attack came with less warning than the first and split them. She and Davan went east with the hill between them and Sorin and Elan. There was no discussion. There was a crossbow bolt and a decision-space of approximately four seconds, which was enough time for someone who thought in that compressed way to understand the terrain, identify the angles, and route. She routed east. Davan was at her shoulder. Sorin and Elan were on the other side of the hill.

She and Davan ran for eight minutes. Then the terrain changed a creek bed, good cover, defensible and she stopped, and Davan stopped beside her, and they stood very still in the creek bed with the sound of the pursuit failing to close.

"North side?" he said quietly.

"Maybe. Sorin can handle it."

They waited two hours. The pursuit never resolved into a direction she could track. The creek bed was cold and smelled of mineral and late-season mud, and she sat with her back against the bank and ate half of a pressed oat

cake from her pack and offered Davan the other half without looking at him. He took it without saying anything. They ate in silence.

"Tell me about Vigil," she said.

He was quiet for long enough that she thought he wasn't going to answer. Then: "My regiment was stationed there for eight months. Watchtower duty, which sounds like nothing and mostly was nothing. We were watching for ship movement from the northern islands old Veilborn routes, supposedly, though we hadn't had intelligence on northern islands in years."

"But?"

"But the order came. Three weeks before I was removed from command. We were told to stand down from the watchtowers and relocate to the southern barracks. All of us. Immediately."

He looked at the creek.

"I asked what for. I was told it was a classified redeployment. I asked who had classified it. Nobody would tell me. I asked if I could speak to anyone above my immediate commanding officer. I was told no."

"And that was the insubordination."

"That was the beginning of it. The middle of it was when I filed a formal objection through the Realm's military judiciary. The end of it was when I found out, two days after being removed from command, that the watchtowers had been used for something else while we were in the southern

barracks. Something that required the towers to be empty and the regiment to be somewhere they couldn't witness it."

"What did they do?"

He looked at her. "I don't know exactly. I know what the towers looked like afterward. I know three of them were burned from inside. I know that the Realm's official record shows unoccupied for maintenance during that period." He looked away. "I know that my regiment was transferred to Vigil's main garrison two weeks later, with no reason given, and were killed in an engagement that the official record calls a defensive action against northern insurgents. There were no northern insurgents. There were no northern ships. There was just my regiment, and then there wasn't."

The creek ran. A bird somewhere above them went through its repertoire and stopped.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't."

"Davan"

"I mean it." Not harshly. Just firmly. "I don't want sorry. I want to understand what happened. I want the thing that did it to be accountable for it. Sorry doesn't help with that."

She understood this. She had had the same relationship with sorry since she was twelve years old.

"Abaddon-Rei," she said. He looked at her. "You think he ordered it."

"I think the towers were being used to watch for something specific from the northern routes, and when he was done using them, your regiment was the only witness to what they'd been used for." She looked at the sky. "And I think the man who engineered the Culling to eliminate every Veilborn in the Realm is not someone who leaves useful witnesses."

He was quiet for a long time. The calculation she could see happening in him was not emotional it was structural, the thing that happens when information clicks into a shape that was always there and you are seeing it for the first time.

"Then I have more reason to be here than I thought," he said finally.

"Yes."

"That's," he paused, "actually somewhat clarifying."

She looked at him. He had the expression of someone who has been carrying something shapeless for years and has just been handed its name. She did not point this out. She looked at the creek instead.

"We'll find Sorin at the Aridus crossroads marker," she said. "Two hours north. Let's move."

CHAPTER 19

THE QUIET DAYS

The four days it took them to reach Memora's glacier were, in Elan's subsequent accounting, the most honest days of the journey. By which he did not mean the best days. He meant the days when the distance was far enough from the last crisis and far enough from the next that the armor came down, not entirely, not deliberately, but in the small ways that armor always comes down when no one is currently threatening to pierce it.

She laughed twice. He recorded both.

The first time was at Sorin's navigation. They were two days from the glacier, on a slope that Sorin claimed was the fastest route and which Davan and she had separately and simultaneously identified as slightly wrong, and when she said so, Sorin said with complete seriousness that the threads indicated a path that was not technically the slope but ran adjacent to it on a plane that the physical terrain did not quite render accurately yet.

"Yet," she said.

"The Loom adjusts terrain in Fracture proximity. Slowly. This path will be accessible in approximately"

"How long?"

"Forty years."

She looked at him for a moment, and then she laughed the short, involuntary one, the exhalation-humor, the of-course sound and she said: "That's the least useful navigation I've ever received."

Sorin, to his eternal credit, smiled.

The second time was at Davan. He had been carrying the cooking pot since Speria because it had ended up in his pack and no one had reclaimed it, and on the third night he admitted that he did not actually know how to cook anything in it and had been relying on whoever took the cooking responsibility usually Elan without declaring this. This somehow became very funny. She laughed until Davan looked simultaneously exasperated and pleased with himself.

She slept. Not perfectly, not without waking twice, but she slept in ways she had not slept since before Exilium, a quality of rest that came from proximity to people she had, without quite deciding to, begun to trust. She did not examine this closely. She let it be.

On the second evening, Elan sat beside her while Sorin and Davan argued quietly about supply distribution.

"Can I ask you something?" Elan said.

"You always ask before you ask," she said. "You've been doing it since the salt flats."

"Habit. Can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"When this is over." He was looking at his journal, not at her. "Whatever over looks like. Do you have somewhere you'd go?"

She thought about this. She genuinely thought about it, which was unusual she had long since stopped thinking about after-things because after required assuming a before that went well enough.

"There's a place," she said, slowly, because she was arriving at the answer as she said it. "In the eastern coast, above the Vigil towers. There used to be a fishing village. My foster father talked about it. He'd been there once as a boy and said the sea was a different color there than anywhere else he'd seen green instead of grey. Something about the depth of the water and the way the light came in."

She stopped. She had not talked about her foster father in years.

"I've never been," she said. "I always thought" She stopped again. "It's probably just a story. The way things are when someone describes them to you through their memories instead of your own."

"Maybe," Elan said. "But maybe the sea is actually green."

She looked at him. He was writing, not looking at her, giving her the gift of being allowed to have said the thing without being watched saying it.

"Maybe," she said.

She did not think about the fishing village again until Dolorath, where she thought about it in a way that had changed.

CHAPTER 20

REUNION

Sorin found them at the Aridus crossroads exactly when she had expected him to, which was, she had begun to understand, not a coincidence. He had Elan with him, and Elan had a new cut above his eyebrow that he touched periodically and looked surprised to find there, the way Elan interacted with all physical discomfort as though it were a novelty he hadn't been informed about.

What she noticed, standing at the crossroads with all four of them in the same place for the first time since the attack: Sorin had been hurt. Not dramatically. A favoring of the left arm, a set to his shoulders that was not quite right, the quality of someone who had taken a hit and was moving past it by not drawing attention to it.

She did not ask about it directly. She came up beside him and said, quietly, while Davan helped Elan with the eyebrow: "How bad?"

"Managed."

"Sorin."

He looked at her. In the afternoon light, the exhaustion in him was visible in a way that it usually wasn't not the tiredness of this journey but the

other kind, the deeper kind, the kind she was starting to associate with what he carried that had nothing to do with the last three weeks.

"It's managed," he said. "I'll tell you when it's not."

She studied him for one more second. Then she said, "All right." She let it go.

That evening, Elan made a genuinely terrible camp stew from the supplies they had remaining over-salted, slightly burnt at the base, containing what appeared to be an unidentified root vegetable he had acquired from a roadside farm in uncertain circumstances and they all ate it because they were hungry and because Elan looked so earnest about it that declining would have been actively cruel.

"This is," Davan said, slowly, "an experience."

"I know," Elan said. "I think the root is actually improving it."

"The root is not improving it," she said.

"The root is doing its best," Elan said with dignity.

Sorin looked at his bowl for a moment. Then he ate another spoonful with the expression of someone making peace with a decision.

She looked around the fire Elan defending the root, Davan working through the stew with pragmatic determination, Sorin quietly finishing his portion and she had a feeling she recognized the texture of, which was the feeling of something you would look back at. Not a good moment, not a

beautiful one, not anything you could point at and say: this. Just the fire and the terrible stew and the four of them eating it in the dark, which was ordinary, which was human, which was the kind of moment the world was eating alive and which she was eating while she could.

She had another spoonful. The root was not improving it. She ate it anyway.

CHAPTER 21

MEMORA ENTRANCE

The glacier was not what she had expected, which was her fault for expecting anything. She had imagined cold. Clinical. The library-quality of cold, quiet and dry and containing. What she found was the opposite of clinical: the glacier lived. It breathed. The blue-white ice had veins of color in it that shifted as the light changed amber, violet, a particular shade of orange that appeared near the entrance for about twenty minutes at midday and then was gone. It smelled like winter and something older than winter, something without a name, the way deep water smells if you've never been near deep water and someone's describing it to you.

Sorin had been here before. She could tell from how he moved through the entrance not the caution of someone learning a space but the ease of someone returning to one. He had been here in other loops. He was remembering here in the particular way of a man for whom memory was layered, each version of the same walk laid over the previous until the walking itself was complicated. She did not ask about this yet.

The interior was carved not quarried but shaped, following the glacier's natural chambers, which meant it breathed around them as the ice moved. Old

movement. Geological time. The kind of movement you couldn't feel but understood was happening. The chambers expanded gradually, one into the next, and the walls held the amber inclusions she had read about: shapes suspended in the ice, visible through it, backlit by some internal quality of the glacier she could not account for.

The first amber inclusion she stood close to was a woman's hand, suspended at the level of her own face, palm up and open. She did not touch the glass.

"Who were they?" she said.

"Preserved at the point of death," Sorin said. "Not the body the impression. The emotional content of the last moment. What they felt, what they thought, what they reached for. That's what's in the amber."

"And when someone holds it"

"You experience the impression. Not the life. The moment. The one thing they were feeling when they let go."

She looked at the hand. She thought about what it meant, that the hand was open. That in the last moment, whatever this person had been holding, they had opened the hand.

"Is it peaceful?" she asked. "The experience?"

"Some of them." He came up beside her. "Some of them are the thing they needed to say and didn't. Some of them are just warmth. The memory of

warmth."

"How many are yours?"

"How many Veilborn died in here across your loops? How many of these impressions are from someone you knew in a version you couldn't save?"

A silence. "I don't know the number," he said. "I stopped counting."

She let it go. The glacier breathed.

"What are we here for?" she said.

"There's an amber at the far end of the archive," he said. "It's not personal. It's a recording not of a person but of an event. A room. Thirty years ago. Abaddon-Rei. What he did." He looked at her. "What you need to understand about the scale of what you're facing. And Davan needs to see it too. He needs to understand what happened at Vigil's towers."

She nodded. She looked at the hand one more time. She walked deeper into the glacier.

CHAPTER 22

THE MEMORY

The amber was the size of a plum. Sorin took it from a specific niche in the glacier wall with the care of someone who had done it before and handled it like something alive. He held it between his palms and it warmed and the amber clarified grew more transparent, then translucent, then it began to play.

The room was not large. A chamber, stone-walled, the quality of stone that came from deep foundations, the kind of room that had been used for important things before it was used for this. There were people in it. Twelve, she counted. Some of them were already understanding what was happening and some of them weren't yet and the worst ones were the ones who were beginning to understand.

The man in the center of the room was not large either. He was composed, soft-voiced, courteous in the manner of someone who had never needed volume to achieve what he wanted because his patience was architectural and the rooms he operated in were always, eventually, his. He spoke to the twelve people with the measured tone of someone explaining a minor inconvenience. She could not hear the words. The amber carried impression, not sound. But she could read the room, the way she had always

been able to read rooms, and what the room said was: the people in it had no inconvenience left to experience by the time he was done.

In the back of the amber-room, young so young, not yet the man she would come to understand was Saraph Dorn. He was watching. His face was doing the specific thing of a person who has made a decision to watch, which was different from a person who was watching because they had no other choice. He was choosing to watch. He was learning.

She did not know yet what he was learning, or what he intended to do with it, or how long it would take. She only knew that he was watching with the face of someone making an inventory.

Then the amber showed her Davan. She was not looking at Davan, but she felt him go still beside her in the way that things go still when stillness is the only available response. She looked. His face was she wanted to look away. Not because it was bad to look at but because it was private, the kind of pain that deserved its private space, the kind of face that people made when something becomes finally understandable and the understanding is terrible.

"The watchtowers," he said. Very quietly.

"Yes," Sorin said.

"He used them for"

"He needed to bring certain elements of the old Veilborn detection network back online briefly. The towers at Vigil were part of that network

before the Culling. He needed them clear and working for one week. Your regiment was the cover for clearing them. The engagement that killed them was the method for ensuring no witnesses."

Davan was very still. Then he said, "My regiment was killed to cover the tracks of a man using old Veilborn towers to find the last Veilborn."

"Yes."

"He was looking for her," Davan said. Not at Sorin. At the amber. "He was looking for you."

She did not answer because there was no answer that was adequate to the sentence.

The amber played to its end and went dark. Sorin set it back in its niche. The glacier breathed.

She was about to speak when the amber showed her something else not from the niche, from inside her own ability, the way the Loom sometimes offered things she hadn't asked for. A thread, luminous and whole and pointing forward. A possible future. She saw it in the two seconds before she could stop it from showing her. Everyone alive. The Fracture closed. The world not dying. The cost: becoming exactly what was standing in the amber-room thirty years ago, speaking softly to twelve people who were running out of time.

She refused it. She pulled back from the thread and let it fall. But she had seen it. She could not unsee it. The Loom had wanted her to see it, and it had shown it to her at this precise moment, in this room, after she had watched Abaddon-Rei, and she understood that the Loom's indifference included a particular kind of cruelty: it would offer you everything you wanted at the exact price you had decided you would never pay.

She walked out of the amber chamber. She walked back through the glacier. She stood outside in the cold and breathed. Elan came out after her. He did not write anything. He just stood beside her in the cold. She was grateful for this in a way she could not have articulated if he'd asked.

CHAPTER 23

THE FUTURE VISION

She did not tell them what the amber had shown her. Not the second part. She told them about Saraph what she had seen, what it implied about his timeline, what it suggested about his methods and his intelligence. She told them about the Vigil connection for Davan's benefit, though Sorin had already done the structural work of that. She gave them the pieces that were actionable.

She did not tell them that she had seen a future where she saved everyone. She did not tell them what it cost.

That night she could not sleep, which was not unusual, but the reason was unusual: she kept returning to it, the vision, the luminous possibility, the way the Loom had offered it with no particular investment in whether she took it. The way a wound offers an exit.

What she had seen was this: herself, at the Loom's visible structure, the place called Aeturnis where the threads were physically present and the aurora sky was crossed by the light of the world's grammar. She had seen herself with both hands in the Loom, repairing the Fracture, pulling the broken threads together the way you pull the edges of a wound. She had seen the world repair.

She had seen the fields of Aridus go green. She had seen what she became in the moment of doing it.

She lay in the dark and thought: it was a possibility. The Loom shows possibilities. Not certainties. Possibilities change.

She thought this very firmly. She thought it several more times. It helped, incrementally.

Davan was not sleeping either. She could hear from the quality of his stillness that he was lying awake on the other side of the camp. She did not call to him. She listened to him not sleeping and was obscurely comforted by it the way you are comforted by evidence that someone else is also carrying weight, not because misery prefers company but because the knowledge that the weight exists and is being carried means someone else is doing the work of carrying it alongside you.

In the morning he asked her, simply: "What do we do with what we know about Saraph?"

"We use it," she said. "Not yet. But eventually."

"What does using it look like?"

"It looks like understanding that Saraph Dorn built an army to take down the thing in that amber room. And that understanding changes what he is, even if it doesn't change what he's done."

Davan thought about this for a long time. Then: "Does it have to change what we do about him?"

"I don't know yet."

"Honest."

"It's all I have right now."

He accepted this. She appreciated that he accepted it. She was beginning to find his lack of social fictions more valuable than she had expected it to be.

CHAPTER 24

SILENCE AFTER

They left Memora on a morning that was, again, too warm. She noticed it more sharply now. The specific quality of wrongful warmth not the comfortable warmth of appropriate weather but the warmth of a day that had arrived slightly ahead of itself, a degree or two beyond what the season should allow. She had been noticing it since Exilium. She was beginning to understand what it was tracking.

She walked and did not speak for the first two hours, and the others let her not speak, which had become their collective practice for the mornings after difficult things.

At midday, Elan came up beside her. "I've been thinking," he said.

"About what?"

"About the woman whose hand was in the amber. The open hand." He was looking at the path ahead. "I've been trying to decide if it was grief or release."

She thought about it. "Does it have to be one?"

"No. I suppose not." He wrote something without looking at the journal. "She seemed like someone who had decided something. Not accepted

it. Decided it. There's a difference."

"What difference?" she said.

"Acceptance is what happens to you. Decision is what you do." He glanced at her briefly and then back at the path. "The open hand reads like decision to me. She chose to open it."

She walked with this for a while. "You're a surprisingly useful person to have around," she said finally.

Elan looked genuinely pleased. "The Guild told me my interpersonal skills were a weakness."

"The Guild was wrong."

He smiled at the path ahead. She did not look at the smile, but she heard it in the quality of his silence afterward.

She thought: the open hand. She thought: decision, not acceptance. She thought: when the time comes, let it be decision.

She did not know yet what time she meant. She would know later.

CHAPTER 25

SARAPH APPEARS

He was not what the Thornguard had prepared her for.

She had been building a picture of Saraph Dorn from his soldiers for weeks. She had constructed him from the method of his Thornguard, from the precision of his intelligence network, from the specific way his orders were executed not the brutality of men following a cruel commander but the efficiency of men following a philosophy. She had been expecting a warlord.

He was sitting at a field table outside a requisitioned farmhouse in the lower reaches of Aridus, reviewing documents, when they came over the ridge and saw him. He looked up before she expected him to look up, which meant his awareness of the surrounding terrain was better than his positioned sentries implied. He looked at her directly.

He was older than she had thought. Not old perhaps fifty but carrying his age in the specific way of someone who had spent it doing something very costly. His face was not cruel. She had been prepared for cruel. Instead it was the face of someone who had long since stopped needing emotion to be visible in order for it to be present.

He stood. "Aera Bat-Shalem," he said. Conversationally. The way you say the name of someone you've been expecting.

"Saraph Dorn," she said.

A pause in which they were both acknowledging that this was the conversation, and that neither of them had a script for it, and that was all right.

"I'm not going to have you taken," he said. "Not here, not today." He sat back down. "Sit down, if you'd like."

She did not sit. He did not seem to expect her to.

"You know what I saw in the amber," she said.

"I assumed you'd been to Memora."

"Then you know I understand some of what you've been building."

"Understanding some of it and understanding all of it are very different," he said. Not defensively. Stating a fact. "Most people who understand some of it conclude that I'm the threat. Most people who understand all of it conclude the same thing. The ones who disagree are usually dead." He looked at his documents. "I'm telling you this so you don't make a decision based on incomplete information."

"What information am I missing?"

He looked up at her. Something in his face shifted almost imperceptible, the adjustment of someone deciding how much. "What you saw in the amber

was thirty years ago," he said. "I've been in that room since, in various capacities. What I saw was not what I intended. What I built was in response." He paused. "What I built is not what you see marching south. What's marching south is what was necessary before what I actually intend can happen."

She was silent for a moment. Then: "Speria is in the path of what's marching south."

"Yes."

"That's not acceptable."

"Almost nothing I've done in thirty years is acceptable," he said. "That's not the relevant question." He called a soldier and spoke two quiet words. The soldier brought a child out of the farmhouse. A girl, seven or eight, clutching something to her chest with the fierce grip of a person holding the one thing they have left.

She stared. The farmhouse had been a Thornguard requisition site. The village had been cleared.

Saraph spoke another quiet word. One of his officers crossed to them with a pack supplies, she could see, the kind you prepared for a journey. He pressed the pack into the girl's free hand. He dismissed her. She went. She did not thank him. He did not look like he expected to be thanked. He looked back at his documents. "We're done here," he said.

She stared at the space where the child had been. She left. She did not know what to do with what she had seen. That was, she was beginning to understand, the specific problem of Saraph Dorn: he did not allow you to hold anything simply.

CHAPTER 26

THE MERCY

Davan did not speak for two hours after they left the farmhouse. She waited. She knew what he was doing because she was doing the same thing: taking apart every assumption she had assembled about Saraph Dorn and laying the pieces out and looking at which ones still fit. Some of them fit differently. None of them were gone.

Eventually Davan said: "He still killed my regiment."

"Yes."

"Whatever he's building toward it doesn't change that."

"No."

"Then why show us the girl?"

She had been thinking about this. "I don't think he showed us the girl. I think he did the thing he does, and we happened to be watching." She looked at the road ahead. "Whatever calculus he's running sparing one person per operation, one survivor, one witness he doesn't explain I don't think it's for our benefit. He was doing it before we arrived. He'll do it after we leave."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Something he's carrying."

Davan was quiet again. Then: "Something he's counting."

She looked at him. He was looking at the road with the expression of someone who has made a connection they aren't happy to have made.

"The Culling," she said. "He watched it. He was in that amber room."

Davan's jaw worked. "He's been counting since then. One at a time. Like"

He stopped.

"Like what?"

"Like penance," Elan said quietly, from behind them.

They walked with this for a while.

"It's not enough," Davan said finally.

"No," she agreed. "But it's"

"I know," she said. He looked at her. She looked back. "I know," she said again, more quietly. "That's the problem."

They walked. The mercy didn't stop being a mercy because the man performing it had blood on his hands. She hated that this was true. She held it alongside everything else she hated that was also true and kept moving.

CHAPTER 27

RETURN TO SPERIA

Speria was four days south. They went north instead.

She and Sorin had discussed this at length, in quiet voices, with the pragmatism of people making a tactical decision that was not also a personal one, or at least not visibly. North was Dolorath. Sorin had been navigating toward it since before she understood what he was navigating toward. The threads in the Aridus fields pointed there. The Loom's behavior, the increasing visibility of the bleed zones, the way the warmth tracked them all of it oriented north. To the valley where the Veilborn had first bled. Where, Sorin had said very quietly, we need to go before the end of this.

But word reached them from a southward-moving refugee a family with too much luggage and the specific hollow expression of people who had left everything twice that Speria was under pressure. Saraph's forces had encircled the southern approaches.

She stopped on the road. She looked north. She looked south.

"We have to go back," Davan said. She looked at him. He looked at her with the steady gaze of someone who has already made his argument internally and knows what she's going to say.

"We can't stop him," she said. "Not with the four of us against a campaign army."

"I know."

"Going back doesn't change the outcome for Speria."

"I know."

"Then why are you saying we should go back?"

"Because," he said, with the patient precision of someone who has thought this through, "there are people in that city who need to know what's coming and have time to move. And because you won't be able to live with not having gone. And because I can't either."

She looked at Sorin. Sorin met her gaze. He was already recalculating routes.

"Two days south," she said. "Warning only. We don't engage the main force."

"Understood," Davan said.

She turned south. She thought, briefly, about the city that had been full of light when they arrived. The baker on Vesper Street. The old man in the doorway and his arrangement with the sky.

She walked south.

CHAPTER 28

THE FALL BEGINS

They came back into Speria's approach from the east, which was still open, and found the city in the particular state of a place that is dealing with bad news by working very hard.

She went to the militia captain a woman named Sera, who had the bearing of someone who had been planning for this for years and was not particularly surprised, just focused and told her what she knew about Saraph's timeline, his methods, his numbers. Sera listened without interrupting. She asked three precise questions. She thanked her, crisply.

"How long?" Sera asked.

"If he pushes two days. Maybe three if he's managing his supply line."

"Then we have two days."

"Yes." Sera nodded. She went back to her reinforcements.

She found Davan at the medical ward. He was not in the ward he was outside it, standing at the door with his hands in his pockets and an expression she was learning to recognize, the expression of someone who has organized themselves around not feeling a thing and is discovering the organization is insufficient.

"He went south with the first evacuation," Davan said. "The boy."

"Good."

"His family had relatives there. He'll be fine."

"Good." He looked at the ward door. She stood beside him. After a moment she said, not kindly but honestly: "You can't stay."

"I know."

"The warning is given. We need to move north before"

"I know, Aera."

She watched him. He was looking at the door and she was looking at him and this was the specific difficulty of having people you cared about in proximity to things you couldn't stop the way caring became a weight you carried into every calculation. She had been trying not to care with this particular specificity. She had been largely unsuccessful.

"Come on," she said. She put her hand on his arm briefly. She did not linger. "We leave at dawn."

He looked at her hand on his arm. He looked at her. "Dawn," he said.

They left at dawn. She did not look back at the city as they went. She would look back once, from the northern rise, before the road curved and the walls disappeared from view. She would look then, and that would be enough, and she would not look again.

CHAPTER 29

THE FALL OF SPERIA

It fell on the second day after they left. She did not see it fall. She heard it from a rider going north who was not running from it so much as running because the alternative to running was stopping.

She got the factual shape of it: Saraph had come in from the south and the east simultaneously. Speria had not burned. That was in the rider's account, specific enough that she believed it: Saraph did not burn cities. He occupied them. He removed what he needed to remove and maintained what was functional. It was, in its own way, more frightening than burning, because burning had a visible end and occupation was open.

She walked with this for two hours. She processed it the way she processed things methodically, filing each piece, assigning it a place in the structure of what she knew.

Then she found, in the ruins of a farmstead they had passed through the previous day, signs of Thornguard occupation and in the corner of the third room, the small carved wooden horse that Mira, the daughter of the household she had spoken to briefly, had been carrying when they arrived.

Mira was twelve. She had brown eyes and a gap where her two front teeth were growing back and had shown Aera the horse with the specific pride of a child who has made something and knows it is good. The horse was in the corner. Mira was not in the corner.

Not dead. She told herself this immediately, and the logic held: Saraph took people, he didn't kill them, not without specific cause, and a twelve-year-old in a farmstead was not specific cause. She was probably evacuated. She was probably in a holding settlement. She was probably fine.

She stood in the corner with the horse in her hand and she was very still for a moment, and then she was not, and Davan came in and found her and held her without speaking because he understood, at this point, that speaking was not what was needed. She stood in the hold of his arms in the corner of the empty room and she did not weep she was past the weeping version of this, had been past it since she was twelve and could not get back to it even when weeping would have been the easier thing but she stayed where she was for a long moment and let herself be held.

Nobody spoke. Elan recorded the silence afterward. He wrote that it was the longest he had ever witnessed. He did not write what she looked like when she finally stood up. He wrote only: I could not bear to write it accurately.

She set the horse down carefully in the center of the room, where anyone coming back for it could find it. She walked out of the farmstead. She walked north.

Something in her that had been holding against various pressures since childhood let go of a thread it had been clenching. Not all the way. But enough that the calculation she had been refusing to run the one the Loom had shown her, the one with a price she had named unacceptable began, in the back of her mind, to run itself without permission.

She walked north and did not stop it.

ACT THREE

DOLORATH TO RUINA

What Remains After Every Choice

CHAPTER 30

THE SILENCE

Dolorath began before she could see it. The ground changed first. The specific warmth of it not the wrongful seasonal warmth she had been tracking but something older and more deliberate, the warmth of earth that had absorbed so much grief over so many years that grief had become a geological property, something the soil itself carried. She felt it through her boots. She stopped, once, and pressed her palm to the ground the way she had once pressed her hand toward a dying thread. The warmth was steady. Waiting.

The valley was vast. In the failing afternoon light the walls of it were layered rock formations, old erosion, and then at dusk, as Sorin had warned her, the ghost-shapes. The Veilborn dead replaying in fragments along the valley walls, not fully formed, not sequential: a hand, a raised face, a motion that had happened here once and the Loom would not let go of. The bleed was deepest here. The grief was deepest here. Everything here was, in some way, permanently happening.

She looked at the valley walls and watched the fragments. She did not speak. Sorin stood beside her. After a while he said, "There's something I need to tell you."

"I know," she said.

"You don't know all of it."

"No. But I know the shape." He was quiet for a moment. In the valley below them, a fragment played a woman turning toward something, beginning a gesture that never completed. Then gone. "Tomorrow," she said. Not to defer it. Because tonight was tonight, and the valley was asking for something she could not quite name but that seemed to require quiet.

"Tomorrow," he agreed.

They made camp in the valley. Not at the base higher, where the warmth was less specific, where the fragments played at enough distance that you could choose whether to watch. She did not choose to watch. She sat with her back to the valley wall and her face toward the camp and she was present in her body, in this moment, in the ordinary fact of fire and food and the four of them in a circle around it.

Elan made tea. Actual good tea, the last of the supply he'd been hoarding since Speria, which he produced with the gravity of someone bringing out a preserved thing.

"For the occasion," he said.

"What occasion?" Davan asked.

Elan considered. "I'm not entirely sure yet. But it seems like an occasion."

She held the cup. The tea was hot and slightly floral and very ordinary. She drank it slowly, attentively, the way you drink something when you are aware you are drinking it.

Davan sat close enough that his arm was against hers. She did not move away. Neither did he. They sat like that in the firelight and the valley breathed around them, warm from thirty years of grief, full of the incomplete gestures of the dead.

She thought: I am going to lose all of this. I can feel it coming the way you feel barometric change, in the back of your teeth. I am going to lose all of this and what comes after is going to require me to become something I cannot yet hold in my mind, and I am sitting in this valley with my arm against his and drinking Elan's last tea and the ground is warm under me.

She thought: let me stay here for one more hour. Just this. Just the tea and the fire and the valley and them.

She stayed. She let the hour be what it was.

In the morning, Sorin said her name.

CHAPTER 31

THE VALLEY OF GRIEF

She had thought she understood what the valley was. She understood now that understanding a place conceptually and being inside it were different activities entirely.

Dolorath was not a geography. It was a condition. The warmth of it was inside her coat and inside her boots and inside the specific quality of her attention everything here was slightly more present than it was elsewhere, the way sound is more present in a room where something happened.

They walked the valley floor in the morning. The fragments played on the walls. She had stopped looking at them not from fear but from the recognition that looking too long was a kind of sorrow she couldn't afford to carry while still walking.

Sorin walked beside her. He had been walking beside her since they woke, not at his usual maintained distance but beside, at the specific proximity of someone who has decided the time for maintained distance is over.

"How long have you known?" she said. "This loop. How long did you know you were going to have to tell me here?"

"Since Exilium," he said. "I knew the shape of it. I didn't know the exact moment until Speria."

"When did you know about me about who I was the first time? The first loop?"

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "The third. The first two times I found you too late." He paused. "Too late means you were already gone. I won't describe those versions. They're mine to carry."

She looked at his face. He was looking at the valley wall, at the fragments, with the expression of a man watching something he has watched thirty-six times and has not found a way to be immune to.

"How old were you," she said. "In the first loop."

"Twenty-three."

"And you kept going."

"You were my sister," he said simply. And then, because simply was not quite enough: "You were my sister, and the world was dying because of what Abaddon-Rei did to the Loom, and I had a specific ability that was a specific response to a specific crack in the world's structure, and stopping felt like I kept going because stopping felt like agreeing. That the Loom gets to say when things end. I didn't agree."

She said, "But the Loom keeps correcting against every intervention."

"Yes."

"You've never beaten it."

"Not yet."

"Not yet," she repeated. He looked at her. She held his gaze. "Tell me the rest," she said.

CHAPTER 32

SORIN BEGINS

He told her in the order that things had happened, which was also the order that things would happen again unless this loop was different, which was the thing he had been believing across thirty-six iterations of this story.

He told her about the Fracture the real mechanism of it, not the academic version but the Veilborn version, the way it felt from inside the blood that was calibrated to the Loom. He told her that Abaddon-Rei had not simply cracked the Loom he had anchored a thread of himself to the Loom's central structure, and the crack was the result of the Loom refusing the anchor, the way a body refuses a foreign thing, and the refusing had not been clean.

He told her that the crack could be repaired. That the Loom had been showing her the mechanism since the first time she'd touched a thread specifically, since the thread that reached back. The Loom wasn't looking for her because she was dangerous. It was looking for her because she was the repair.

The last Veilborn heir, operating in the proximity of the Loom's central fracture, could close it.

He told her the cost.

She listened to the cost with the expression she used when she was not going to react to something until she had fully understood it. He recognized this expression. He had seen it in thirty-six variations. He had never seen it receive exactly this information.

"The Loom absorbs the mechanism of the repair," she said, when he finished. "Meaning"

"Meaning the Veilborn who closes the Fracture cannot step out of the Loom afterward. The repair requires something to anchor it. You would be the anchor."

Silence.

"And you've been living with this," she said, "across thirty-six loops."

"Yes."

"Because you thought"

"Because I thought there had to be another way. I've been looking for another way since the third loop." He looked at the valley wall. "I haven't found one yet."

She did not say: then there isn't one. She knew he knew this. She knew that he had known for long enough that the knowing had become a different shape not despair, not acceptance, something harder and more specific than either.

She said: "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

He looked at her. "Because," he said, "every time I've told you early, you spend the rest of the loop trying to find the other way instead of living what's in front of you. And I" He stopped. He started again. "I needed you to have Speria. And Elan. And Davan. I needed you to have them for themselves, not as a reason to fight harder. I needed you to have the good parts, such as they are, before you knew."

She was very still. Then: "That wasn't your choice to make."

"No. It wasn't."

"You made it anyway."

"Yes."

"And you're going to tell me it was because you loved me and not because you thought you knew better."

He looked at her with the tiredness that was not sleep-tiredness. "I'm going to tell you it was both. And that I'm sorry for the part that was the second thing."

She sat with this. She was furious. She knew she was furious because she could feel it in the particular way of anger that has nowhere to go, that has identified a legitimate target and also understood that the target was her brother and that he had spent thirty-six iterations looking for a way to protect her from this moment.

She was furious. She let herself be furious for exactly as long as she could afford.

Then she said: "Tell me the rest."

CHAPTER 33

THE TRUTH EXPANDS

He told her about Abaddon-Rei's actual position not the political power, not the military shadow, but the metaphysical one. The thread he had anchored to the Loom's central structure thirty years ago was still there. It had cracked the Loom in the refusing, but it had not been expelled. It was still embedded. Which meant that every time the Loom moved every time the world tried to repair itself, every harvest season, every birth, every moment of change the thread caught on it. Like a splinter the body cannot expel and cannot absorb.

Abaddon-Rei had wanted to own fate. He hadn't achieved it. What he had achieved was something potentially worse: the world's grammar, cracked and caught on his ambition, unable to fully function, slowly fraying at the edges, producing the bleed zones and the wrong rivers and the children with other people's memories.

"He can't be killed the conventional way," she said. "Not while the thread is embedded. Killing the man doesn't remove the thread. The thread would persist in the Loom and the fraying would continue, possibly accelerate."

"So the repair has two parts."

"Yes."

"Remove the thread. Close the Fracture."

"In that order. Because removing the thread while the Fracture is open would cause"

"The Loom would bleed out," she said. She knew this the way she knew her ability from blood, not study. "Like removing a splinter from a wound before the wound is closed."

"Yes."

She was quiet for a long time. They were sitting on the warm ground of Dolorath, the valley open around them, the afternoon light dropping toward the hour when the fragments would begin on the walls.

"And you can't remove the thread yourself," she said. "The loop-walker can't access the Loom's central structure directly. Only a Veilborn with thread-manipulation ability can."

"Only you."

"Only me."

"Yes."

She looked at him. She thought: here is the shape of everything. Here is what thirty-six iterations have been building toward. Here is the thing he has been carrying since he was twenty-three years old, crossing and crossing and

crossing the same broken world, watching me die and resetting and watching again because he couldn't stop and couldn't find the other way.

She thought: I understand. She did not say it yet. Not yet.

"Show me the ring," she said.

CHAPTER 34

THE QUESTION

He took the ring from his hand. She had been not-asking about it since the first morning in Exilium. She had been carrying the not-asking alongside the three seconds of recognition and the dream she could never quite hold in waking memory, and now Sorin held it out to her on his palm, and she picked it up.

Iron. Worked in a pattern she could now see clearly: a thread, stylized, looping back on itself. The specific pattern of the central Loom structure as it appeared to Veilborn eyes not a common image, not something you could find in markets or records. Something that could only have been made by someone who had seen it.

"Our father made it," Sorin said. "Before the Culling. He made two one for each of us. You were three years old. He put yours on a chain around your neck. He put mine on his finger and told me to take it when I was old enough and keep it until I understood what it meant."

She sat with the ring in her palm. "When did you understand?" she said.

"The first loop. When the Loom showed me what it was and what it was for." He was quiet. "It's an anchor. Small. Imprecise. But Veilborn-made,

Veilborn-indexed it marks you as Veilborn to the Loom in a way that doesn't require you to be actively using your ability. In the early loops, before I understood more about the Loom's mechanics, I thought it might protect you. Keep the Loom from" He stopped. "It can't protect you. But it remembers you. It tells the Loom who you are. Every time."

She looked at the ring. She thought about a three-year-old with it on a chain around her neck, not knowing what it was, only knowing her father had put it there. She thought about the fire when she was twelve, and losing everything, and how some things you kept without knowing you were keeping them.

"I dreamed about it," she said. "The ring. For years. I didn't know what the dream was."

"I know," he said. "The Loom indexed you to it. Part of you always knew."

From Elan's position, a slight movement the journalist's body adjusting the way it adjusts when the journalist is watching something he understands is important. She glanced at him briefly. His eyes were wet. He was not writing yet. He was just watching.

She put the ring back in Sorin's palm. He looked at her. She said: "Did you ever find a version where I didn't become what the Loom showed me I would?"

He was quiet for a long time. The valley breathed. The warmth of the ground moved through her in a steady pulse.

"Not yet," he said.

She heard the still of hope in those two words. Not the presence of hope the absence of its opposite. He had not given up. He was on loop thirty-seven and he had not given up, and the specific quality of this was something she needed a moment to hold.

She looked at the valley. "Tell me the rest tomorrow," she said. "Tell me the one you've never told me."

He went still. "How long have you known I know there's one?" he said.

"Since the first day. You've been calibrating what you tell me. There's been one iteration the size and weight of which you've kept separate from everything else you've mentioned." She looked at him. "I can feel it from here."

He looked at her. Something in him that had been held a certain way for a very long time shifted slightly, the way old ice shifts before it breaks.

"Tomorrow," he said.

"Tomorrow," she agreed.

CHAPTER 35

THE ANSWER

In the morning she woke before the others and sat on the warm ground and looked at the valley. The fragments had gone with the dark they only played at dusk, she had learned, when the Loom's bleed was most visible. In the morning the valley was just a valley, large and old and warm and carrying its history in the ground instead of the air.

She sat with what Sorin had told her the previous day and held it in the careful way of someone handling something volatile. The mechanism. The cost. The two-part repair. The fact that she was the only person in the world who could do it and the doing of it was permanent.

She had known, she thought, since the amber-vision at Memora. The Loom had shown her then and she had refused, but the showing had left a mark she couldn't wash off.

She sat with this. She sat with the fishing village above Vigil's coast that she had never seen, with the green sea that might be a story or might be real. She sat with Mira's horse and Corren who hummed while he worked and the old man in Speria's doorway and his arrangement with the sky.

She had a small, specific hope she had never said aloud to anyone. It was not cosmic. It was not grand. It was this: she wanted to see the sea before the end. The specific green sea above Vigil's coast.

She wanted to see the green sea. She held this. It was small. It was stupid, probably. The world was ending and she was sitting in a valley of grief wanting to see a particular color of water.

She held it anyway. Because it was hers.

Sorin woke and found her sitting there and came and sat beside her without speaking. She did not look at him. "Is it possible," she said, "that I could see it first?"

"See what?"

"There's a place above Vigil's towers. Eastern coast. The sea is green there. My foster father told me. I've never" She stopped. "It doesn't matter. It's not strategic. I know the route doesn't allow for it."

He was quiet for a moment. "Vigil is east of Aeturnis by three days."

"That's east of where we need to go."

"Yes."

"Then it's not possible."

He was quiet. She looked at the valley. Then she heard him exhale, slowly, and say: "We could go east first."

She looked at him. "We don't have time"

"We have enough," he said. It was not a concession. It was a calculation. She could see him running the threads in his mind, the route-work. "Two days east. Three days to Aeturnis from Vigil's coast. We have enough time."

She looked at him for a long moment. "You've never offered that before," she said. "Any loop."

"No."

"Why now?"

He looked at her. His eyes were very steady and very tired and very present. "Because you asked. Because I'm done calibrating." He paused. "Because it costs me nothing and it gives you" He stopped. Started again. "You should see the sea, Aera."

She looked at the valley. She thought: the Loom is not going to give me this. The world is not going to give me this. My brother is giving it to me. She thought: I'm going to take it.

"All right," she said.

CHAPTER 36

THE RING

She was going to tell Davan that night. Not everything. But enough. Enough for him to understand what was coming without her having to explain the mechanism in the middle of it happening.

She found him at the edge of the camp, standing with his back to the fire and his face to the valley, doing the thing he did when he was thinking not looking at anything specific, just letting his vision go long while his mind did something internal.

She came and stood beside him anyway. He did not startle. He knew her step now. She knew his.

"I need to tell you something," she said. He turned to look at her. She held his gaze. "Tell me," he said.

She told him the shape of it. The repair. The cost. Not in the technical language Sorin used but in the straightforward language of someone explaining a thing they have accepted. She spoke the way she had learned to speak when the truth required no decorating: flat, clear, present.

He listened the way he always listened completely, without the social fillips of nodding and affirming, just actual reception. His face moved through

things she watched and did not name.

When she finished, he said: "No."

"Davan"

"No." Not loud. Not theatrical. Just the quiet, absolute no of someone who has reached a wall. "There has to be another way. Sorin said"

"Sorin said not yet. Which is different from no."

"He's had thirty-six"

"Davan." She said his name the way she said things she needed him to hear. "I know. I know that's not enough. I know not yet is still the shape of something that hasn't been solved. I'm telling you because you deserve to know. Not because I'm asking for permission."

He looked at her. The specific pain in his face was the pain of someone confronting the exact limit of what they can control, which was a pain she recognized, which was a pain she had been sitting with for days, which was a pain that did not get better by being named but did get slightly more manageable.

"I'm going with you," he said. "Wherever this goes."

"I know."

"Until" He stopped.

"Until," she agreed. Neither of them finished the sentence. Neither of them needed to.

He reached out and touched her face. Not performing it just the specific, plain gesture of someone who has decided that the small true things are the ones worth doing when large true things are unavailable. She let him. She turned her face slightly into his hand.

"The sea first," she said. "Sorin found us two days."

He looked at her. She watched something happen in him the specific thing that happens when someone who has been braced against the worst receives a small, illogical mercy and doesn't quite know what to do with it.

"The sea," he said. "The green sea. Before everything else." His hand came down from her face. He looked at the valley, at the warm dark of it. "All right," he said.

From the direction of camp, Elan's voice: "Tea. While it's hot."

She almost laughed. She let it come the short, involuntary sound, the of-course exhalation. Davan watched it happen with an expression she didn't have a name for and didn't need one.

They went back to camp. They drank the tea.

CHAPTER 37

THE ALMOST LOOP

He told her the next morning, before they broke camp. She had known it was coming. She had known it the same way she knew things from blood: not logically, not through evidence, but through the specific texture of how he had been since she'd told him she knew there was one. He had been carrying it differently the way you carry something knowing you are about to set it down.

Davan and Elan were repacking on the other side of camp. Sorin sat across from her at the dead fire. He had his hands around a cold cup.

"Tell me," she said.

He told her. "It was loop twenty-two. Fourteen years ago, in my time the subjective time. We had reached Aeturnis. You had removed the thread. The Fracture was closing I could see it in the Loom, the way the light changed when the repair was happening." He paused. He looked at the cup. "Everything was working. For the first time across all twenty-two iterations, everything was working. The thread was out. The Fracture was sealing. You were in the Loom and the Loom was taking the repair and the world"

Another pause. "The fields in Aridus went green. I saw it from Aeturnis. I saw them go green."

She was very still.

"Then you made one more adjustment," he said. "One thread. A specific one I had told you not to touch. I had told you three times not to touch it. You touched it because it was fraying and you could see it fraying and you couldn't stop yourself. The adjustment it was too much. The Loom accepted the repair and then"

His voice changed. Not breaking. Altering. Something going through a gear it had not gone through in fourteen years. "It sealed around you faster than the cost required. It shouldn't have. It shouldn't have been faster. I don't know why it was. You were gone in four seconds instead of the minutes I had been counting on. Four seconds. I had a sentence ready. Half a sentence. I had your name in my mouth."

Silence. The valley warm around them.

"I kept it because naming it would have destroyed us both before we finished," he said. "I'm naming it now because there's nothing left to protect. You should know. There was a version where the fields went green. I saw it. For four seconds, the world was going to be all right. And I want you to know I want you to carry that when you're doing it again. The fields went green."

She looked at him. He looked at the cup.

She did not say: don't touch the specific thread. She knew which one he meant. She had always known which one she would want to touch.

She said: "Thank you for telling me."

He nodded. She got up and finished packing. She did not look at the valley. She looked at the road east, toward the coast, toward the two days they had, toward the sea she had never seen. She thought: the fields went green. She let herself hold it. It was small and it was his and he had kept it for fourteen years and he had given it to her now and she was going to keep it. She was going to keep it all the way to the end.

CHAPTER 38

DEATH IN DOLORATH

They came back to Dolorath from the east, and the sea had been green.

She had stood at the edge of the cliff above the Vigil towers and looked at it for an hour in the morning light, and it had been exactly the color her foster father had described a green that was not the green of any other water, the specific green of depth and light at an exact angle, the green of something that had been itself for a very long time and intended to keep being itself regardless of who was watching.

She had not spoken while she was looking at it. None of them had. Davan had stood beside her. She had taken his hand. He had held it. That was all. That was enough.

She held the memory of it now as they walked back down into the valley, because she needed something to hold and this was the right thing: specific, small, hers.

The valley was warm. The ground was warm. The fragments would begin at dusk.

Sorin slowed. She knew before she turned. She knew from the slowing, from the specific way his breath changed, from the warmth of the ground

under her feet which was not just old grief but something else now, something responding to his blood and hers and the Loom's knowledge of what was about to happen here.

"Now?" she said.

"Yes," he said. "I'm sorry. Yes."

She turned. He was standing still, and he was looking at her with the expression she had been seeing in fragments across the entire journey and could finally name: the expression of someone who loves you and is out of time and knows both things simultaneously.

"Sorin," Elan said, behind her. Very quietly.

"Stay there, Elan."

She crossed to him. She stood in front of him and she looked at him her brother, the Son of Peace, the man who had been twenty-three years old in a broken world and decided that stopping was agreeing, and who had not stopped for thirty-seven iterations and she looked at him until she had seen him fully, because he deserved to be seen fully.

He sat down on the warm ground. She sat beside him.

He said, "There's a detail I didn't tell you. The one from loop twenty-two."

"Tell me."

"Before the Loom took you in that version, the fast one you turned around. You looked at me. And you smiled." He was looking at the valley floor. "I don't know if you knew what was happening. I don't know if it was reflex or choice. But you turned around and you smiled, and that's the last thing I saw in that loop before I came back. I've been carrying that for fourteen years." He looked at her. "I wanted you to know that in the version where it worked, you were smiling. That was the last thing."

She did not let herself think about whether she would smile this time. She was sitting beside her brother in the valley of grief and the ground was warm and the light was going. She took his hand. The Loom took him very quietly. Not dramatically she had not expected dramatic. She had expected the quiet ending of someone whose thread had run its full and impossible length, and that was what she got: a gradual lightening, a warmth from his hand that became light, a quality of the world adjusting itself to account for an absence.

She held his hand until there was nothing left to hold.

She stayed where she was for a while. The valley was quiet. The fragments had not started yet dusk was still twenty minutes away. She sat in the interval.

Behind her, Elan was not writing. She knew this without looking. She would know later, when she read the manuscript, that he had waited until she

stood before he put pen to page. That he had given her the interval, completely, without recording it.

She stood. She looked at the place where Sorin had been. The warm ground held nothing visible. But the threads, if she looked the threads were different here now, in the way of a place where something large and Veilborn-specific had ended. Reoriented. Pointing forward.

She turned north. Toward Ruina. Toward Aeturnis beyond it. She walked.

From behind her, Davan fell into step. Elan fell into step beside him. Nobody spoke. There was nothing to say that the walking did not already say.

She walked north. She was, she understood, what she had always been walking toward. The Loom had known since the thread reached back in the bleed zone outside Exilium. She had known since the amber-vision in Memora. She was done not knowing.

She walked, and she was not afraid, and that was not because she was brave. It was because she had run the calculation and the math had completed itself and she was, as Elan would later write, walking toward a thing she had decided. Not accepted. Decided.

At dusk, the valley walls began to play. She was already gone.

CHAPTER 39

THE NIGHT BEFORE

They made camp at the edge of the dead fields, where Aridus ended and the stone began, and she could already feel the difference in the air the specific quality of a place the Loom was watching. Elan had the fire. She had her pack and the cold ground and the habit of sitting with her back to something solid.

Davan came and sat across from her. He had been doing this since Dolorath sitting near her, not speaking, not requiring anything.

Tonight, he did not stay quiet.

"There has to be another way," he said.

She laughed. It was not the short involuntary sound he had coaxed out of her in the salt flats, not the exhalation of someone surprised by warmth. It was the wrong kind of laugh. The kind that arrives when a person has been very controlled for a very long time and something in the machinery has finally, briefly, slipped.

"Another way," she said. The words came out sharper than she intended. Or maybe exactly as she intended. She had stopped being able to tell. "You think I didn't look?" He flinched. That more than anything she had said, more than the laugh made something in her twist. She kept going anyway. "I

counted them," she said, too fast now, the words coming in the wrong order. "Every variation. Every thread I tried to hold instead of cut. Every time I thought: maybe this one bends. Maybe this one has some give in it. Maybe if I'm careful enough" Her voice cracked. She registered it the same way she registered the cut on her arm in Exilium: noted, filed, irrelevant to what needed doing. "Do you know what hope looks like after the hundredth time it fails?"

He didn't answer. She hadn't left space for him to. "It looks like cruelty," she said. "It looks like letting it fail again because you're too frightened to accept that you were the only answer all along and you didn't want to be. Because an answer that costs this much should have to fight harder to be true. It should have to be wrong at least once before it becomes inevitable." She stopped. Her hands were shaking. She did not know when that had started. She looked at them. She looked at Davan.

He had not moved back from her. He had not put distance between them. He was sitting across the dead fire exactly where he had been, watching her with the expression she had catalogued and filed under: things I do not examine directly. He was not afraid of what he had just seen. He was not trying to fix it. He was just present.

"Aera," he said. Quiet. Just that. Just her name.

She could not look at him. She looked at the fire instead at what remained of it, the embers going from orange to the dim, patient red of something that has decided to finish on its own terms.

"I know what I'm asking you to watch," she said, finally. The sharpness was gone. "I know that's not nothing. I'm not asking you to be all right with it. I'm asking you to let me finish."

Silence. Then the specific sound of someone settling into the ground beside her not sitting down, but arriving. She felt his shoulder against hers. He did not speak. He did not say: I understand. He did not say: it's all right. He had learned, by now, which words she could receive and which ones were walls she would have to dismantle later, alone. He stayed.

The fire went out. She sat in the dark beside him and let her hands stop shaking, which took a while, and did not apologize for the sharpness, which would have been a lie, and did not look at him until morning, when the road to Aeturnis was already visible in the early light and there was nothing left to do but walk it.

She never told me what was said that night. She didn't need to. I was sitting close enough to the edge of the firelight that I could see her hands, and that was enough to record. I wrote nothing. I will record it now, from memory, as faithfully as I can: her hands shook and then they stopped, and he did not move away. That is the shape of it. That is what I witnessed.

ACT FOUR

AETURNIS

The Reckoning at the Edge of the World

CHAPTER 40

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

The road to Aeturnis was not on any map Elan had ever made. He would add it later afterward, in the manuscript but he would note that any map he drew of the approach would be incomplete by definition, because the approach changed as they walked it. The terrain responded to her presence in the way that terrain in Loom-bleed zones responded, but more so: old paths cleared themselves, rocks settled, the specific clarity of a way that was being recognized, not discovered.

The Loom knew they were coming.

She walked at the front and she was different than she had been before Dolorath not harder, not colder, but present in a new way. The armor was still there, but it was doing something he had not seen it do before, which was sitting lightly. She had stopped maintaining it. She was wearing it because she had always worn it and some habits of self-preservation don't come off even when you've decided to walk into the thing they were built to protect against.

Davan walked beside her, not at the distance he'd maintained in the first weeks but close, in the specific proximity of someone who has decided that the time for maintained distances is also over.

They traveled for four days. The terrain shifted from the dead fields of Aridus's edge to rockier ground to the specific geological strangeness of the world's border, where the stone was older than the stone elsewhere and the sky behaved slightly differently not a visible difference, but a quality, the way the sky at sea feels different from the sky over land even if you can't say exactly how.

On the third day, they encountered Saraph Dorn. Not his army. Him. Alone, or nearly two guards, both wounded, on the road from the direction of Ruina. He had the bearing of someone who had done what he came to do and was moving on, and the face of someone who had done what he came to do at a cost he had already calculated and was not complaining about.

She stopped. He stopped.

"The Pale Architect," she said. "He's moving toward Aeturnis."

"He was," Saraph said. "He encountered an obstacle." A pause. "You."

"What I could manage of me, yes."

She looked at him. He was gravely wounded. "Is he dead?" she said.

"No. He can't die. You know this."

"You bought time."

"I bought what I could." He looked at her steadily. "Whatever you're going to do at Aeturnis, you have a window. I estimate six hours before he arrives. He was delayed."

She did not ask all the questions she had. She said: "I understand what you were building. I don't forgive it. But I understand it."

He looked at her. Something moved across his face that she could not quite categorize not gratitude, not relief. The particular expression of someone who has not expected to be understood and is finding it stranger than expected.

"That's enough," he said.

He stepped aside. She walked past. Davan and Elan followed. She did not look back. Behind them, she heard one of Saraph's guards say, quietly, something she couldn't catch. She heard Saraph say nothing. She heard the sound of a man continuing, regardless.

CHAPTER 41

THE ADVANCE

The aurora began the following morning. She had expected Aeturnis to announce itself gradually. Instead it arrived all at once one step on ordinary stone, the next step and the sky was different, lit from within by threads of light that crossed and recrossed in patterns she recognized the way she recognized the ring. Not from memory. From blood.

The Loom was visible.

She stopped. She looked up. She had always been able to see the threads faintly, in most places; brightly in bleed zones. Here they were not faint. They were the sky. The full structure of the world's grammar, crossed above them in the specific complexity of something that had been running uninterrupted for longer than anyone had a word for, except that a crack ran through it visible, if you knew what you were looking at, as a seam of wrong-colored light that ran from east to west across the aurora.

The Fracture.

She was seeing it directly for the first time.

"Does it hurt?" Davan said, from beside her. He was watching her face, not the sky.

"No," she said. "It's" She looked for the word. "It's like recognizing your own handwriting from very far away."

He looked up at the sky. She could see him trying to see what she saw and seeing just aurora the luminous without the structure, the light without the grammar. Not his fault. Not his limitation. Just a different set of eyes.

"I'll need some time once we reach the center," she said. "The removal first. Then the repair."

"I'll be there."

"I know."

They walked into Aeturnis. The threads brightened around them as they went, responding to her presence the way threads responded in bleed zones but without the wrongness of it this was not a wound responding to heat, this was a wound recognizing the specific instrument of its repair.

She had a thought, absurd, small, the kind of thought that arrives in moments of great consequence because the mind does not always handle great consequence with appropriate gravity: she had not finished the last cup of Elan's tea. She had left it half-drunk at camp the morning they found Saraph. She would not go back for it. This was a small and irrelevant loss and she was thinking about it anyway because that was how minds worked in moments like this one, irrational and illogical and unclean.

She laughed. One breath. Involuntary.

Davan looked at her. She shook her head. He didn't ask. He was getting very good at not asking the things she couldn't answer in words.

They reached the center. The aurora was directly overhead. The Fracture's seam ran from one horizon to the other.

She stopped. She looked up. "Aera," Davan said. "I know," she said. She looked at him. She held what she saw: the specific, unperformable fact of him, here, at the end of the world, because she had been worth following. "I know." Then she raised her hands to the Loom.

CHAPTER 42

THE BATTLE

Abaddon-Rei arrived in the third hour. She was two-thirds through the removal she could feel the thread, the specific one, the one with his ambition wound into it when the quality of the air changed in the way that announced his approach. She did not stop.

He came across the aurora-lit ground with the unhurried pace of someone who does not use urgency because urgency implies that something could go wrong. He was as she had seen him in the amber-room thirty years younger composed, soft-voiced, a man whose cruelty was so architectural that it required no visible affect to do its work. He looked at her hands in the Loom. He looked at the thread she was working to remove.

"I'll need you to stop," he said. Conversationally. She kept working.

"Aera." He said her name with the cadence of someone who has learned it from intelligence reports and has practiced it. "The thread is mine. What you're attempting is"

"I know what I'm attempting," she said. She did not look away from the thread. "You should probably stop me. You won't."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because stopping me requires you to enter the Loom's visible field while I have both hands in it, and you know what Veilborn blood does in the Loom's visible field at this proximity, and you won't risk it. You built your entire plan around not risking it. That's why you destroyed us one at a time instead of all at once."

A pause. Brief. She heard it.

"Thorough," he said.

"I had good teachers." He moved to the left. She tracked him without looking. He moved to the right. She tracked him.

"You understand what happens to the person who closes the Fracture," he said.

"Yes."

"Then why would you"

"Because I ran the calculation," she said. "The math has one answer. I'm not interested in pretending it has another."

He was quiet. She worked the thread. It was loosening she could feel it, the specific resistance of something embedded for thirty years beginning to yield.

Then he said something she had not expected. One sentence, very quiet, the composure of him fracturing for exactly the time it took to say it and then

closing again as though it had never moved: "I thought it would be enough. To hold fate. I thought if I could hold it, everything else"

And then the closure, the return to the composed surface. He never said it again.

It was one sentence. She heard it and she did not stop working and she did not look at him and she did not acknowledge it because he closed it before she could acknowledge it and the closure was deliberate and she respected that the closure was deliberate. She understood him, for one second. She found this, as Sorin had promised, more disturbing than not understanding him.

Then the thread came free.

CHAPTER 43

THE VISION RETURNS

What happened when the thread came free was not what she had expected. She had expected resistance the Loom pulling back, Abaddon-Rei acting, some final obstacle. What happened was silence.

The thread left the Loom's structure cleanly, the way something long embedded leaves when the removing is done exactly right, and the Loom went very still.

She held the thread. It was warm in her hands his warmth, his ambition, thirty years of architectural patience wound into a filament she was now holding outside the structure that had been broken by it.

She looked at Abaddon-Rei. He was watching the thread. His face had completed its return to composed, but she could see now that she knew to look for it the hairline in it. Not the crack he had shown. The one before the crack. The place where the man who had wanted too much was still there, somewhere, looking at the thing that was his and had been removed.

She released the thread. It didn't fall. The Loom received it absorbed it into its own structure in the specific way of something that belongs inside a

system and has been outside too long. The Loom took it back and it ceased to be his and began to be part of the grammar again.

She heard Abaddon-Rei make a sound. Very small. Not a word.

Then she turned to the Fracture.

The vision was back the amber-image from Memora, the possibility the Loom had shown her: the fields going green, the world repaired, the cost. She saw it now not as possibility but as present, the thing she was about to do rather than the thing she was being offered.

She felt the Loom waiting.

She thought: the fields went green. She thought: loop twenty-two. She thought: Sorin, twenty-three years old, deciding that stopping was agreeing. She thought: Mira's horse in the corner of the room. She thought: Elan's tea. She thought: a specific green sea above Vigil's coast, in the morning light, for one hour. She thought: Davan.

She raised her hands to the Fracture.

CHAPTER 44

THE CHOICE

He came from across the aurora-lit ground and she saw him coming and she could have prevented what was happening and she did not prevent it. This is the part she would need people to understand, if there were people left who were in the position to understand it: she made a choice. Not at the end, not in desperation. In the middle of her own agency, with full knowledge of what was happening and full knowledge of what it meant, she opened the space he needed and she let him come.

He had understood, she thought, since Dolorath. Maybe earlier. He had understood and he had not said it and she had not said it and they had both been carrying the understanding the way you carry something you have not been given permission to put down.

He came across the ground and he said: "Aera."

She heard her name in his voice. She had been hearing it in his voice for months, but now she heard it in the way that final things are heard fully, completely, without any filtering, the specific sound of it landing in her exactly as it was sent.

"I know," she said.

"I love you."

He said it the way he said things that were facts he had examined from every angle and arrived at with complete certainty. Not a performance. A statement.

"I know," she said again. She looked at him. She held what she saw: still the same assessment she had been running on him since Speria's gate, and it still resolved to the same answer, which was that he was one of those rare human beings who was consistently, stubbornly, almost irritatingly the exact version of himself that he presented.

She thought: I am glad I knew you.

That was a specific, small, true thought and she held it.

"You have to let me finish," she said.

"I know."

"Step back from"

"Aera." His voice had changed. Not louder. Lower. The kind of low that meant something had moved past arguing. "Don't make me something you have to survive."

She went still.

She had been running an assessment on Davan Cole since Speria's gate, and the assessment had always resolved the same way: honest, consistent, the exact version of himself he presented. She had been right. This was the exact

version of himself he presented. This sentence this specific, impossible sentence was the most him thing he had ever said to her, and she understood what it cost him to say it and she understood what it meant and she could not answer it.

She looked at him. He looked at her.

She thought: the open hand. Decision, not acceptance. She thought: I choose this too. Not what comes after the going. I choose the going. She had always known, in the way of things known from blood, that her going could be agency or it could be defeat and that the difference was hers to determine.

She opened the space. He came through it.

She turned back to the Fracture and she raised her hands and the Loom began to close around her and she thought: Green. The sea was green.

She did not touch the specific thread. She kept her hands where Sorin had said. She did not touch it.

CHAPTER 45

THE FINAL ACT

The Loom closed the Fracture from the inside out.

Elan could not see the mechanics of it he did not have Veilborn blood, he could not read the threads. What he could see was the aurora changing. The seam of wrong-colored light that had crossed the sky from east to west narrowing, slowly, the way a wound narrows when it is being healed correctly. Slowly and then faster, the edges of it coming together, the Loom's structure knitting across the gap.

He watched it and he wrote nothing. His hand was on the journal and the pen was in his hand and he could not move it, because what he was watching was the kind of thing that if you described it in the moment of watching it you would describe it wrong. You had to hold it first. The description could come later, when the shape of it was fully present and you could find words that were accurate and not just close.

He watched Abaddon-Rei. The Pale Architect was watching the aurora close, and his face was Elan would spend a long time in the manuscript trying to describe this face, the face of a man watching the thing he had spent thirty years and the lives of everyone in the way of anchoring to himself being taken

back by the world it had always belonged to. He would eventually write only: he looked like a man counting a loss that was also the completion of something. I cannot give him more than this because I do not think he deserves more, but this much is accurate.

He turned and walked out of Aeturnis. He did not run. He did not speak. He left.

Elan would learn later, months later, from sources he would not name in the manuscript, that Abaddon-Rei had gone east after Aeturnis, alone, and that what became of him after that was not something the world's records had a clean account of. He would write: some things the Loom takes back without explanation. This appears to be one of them.

The aurora completed its closing. The seam of wrong-colored light was gone. The sky was just the sky.

Elan stood in Aeturnis in the ordinary night that followed and looked at a thread near where she had stood. It had been fraying for thirty years he could not see threads, but he knew from Sorin's accounts which one it would be. The one that had been fraying since the Fracture. The one that had been losing coherence, decade by decade, as the damage accumulated. He could not see if it had gone still. But the quality of the air was different. Something that had been wrong in the background of everything, so long wrong that he had

stopped registering it as wrong, was not wrong anymore. Like a sound you didn't know was there until it stopped.

He picked up his pen.

CHAPTER 46

INTO THE LIGHT

He walked into the Loom's visible structure and he did not come back.

Elan watched him go. He did not try to stop him. He had understood since Speria since the medical ward and the look on Davan's face when he was caught sitting with a sick child at dawn and was embarrassed about it he had understood that Davan Cole was a man for whom the only truly intolerable thing was to remain when remaining meant bearing witness to something he had caused and could not repair. She had given him the opening. He had understood what the opening meant. He had gone through it.

He walked into the light. The Loom's visible structure responded. Elan saw this clearly, though he could not have explained the seeing: a thread near the point of entry that had been moving imperceptibly, the slow drift of something in the last stage of failing went still. Completely still. The stillness of something that has found its resolution.

And a color appeared that Elan had no name for. Not in his working vocabulary, not in any language he had studied. It was in the range of blue and was also not blue, was warm in the way blues are not supposed to be warm. It

appeared for approximately thirty seconds and then was gone and did not return.

He wrote it down. He did not explain it. He did not have an explanation. He had a witnessed, specific detail, and he recorded it accurately, because that was the job.

He was alone in Aeturnis. He stood for a while with his back to the place where both of them had gone, and he looked at the sky. The aurora was ordinary now the aurora of a sky that was doing what aurora does, light without grammar, beautiful without meaning the specific thing it had meant for the last thirty years.

He picked up his pack. He walked back through the world the long way the only way, since there was no one left to navigate by threads. Through Aeturnis and across the edge of the known world and through the Paenitora marshes, which he had crossed once before and did not discuss and would not discuss, because some things you carry and some things you carry quietly and the crossing of the Paenitora was the second kind.

Through Aridus, which he walked with his eyes open, watching the fields. On the third day through Aridus, the crops came up. Not all at once not the magical-sudden-green of stories. Gradually, the way actual crops come up: with effort, with time, with the slow insistence of a world that has been trying

to work for thirty years and has finally found that the thing holding it back has been removed.

He watched a field that had been brown go, in the course of two days' walking, from brown to something you could begin to call green. He stopped in the middle of that field on the second day and put his hand to the earth and it was cold. Cold the way earth in spring is cold. Not the warmth of Dolorath. Not the wrongful warmth of tracked grief. Just the ordinary cold of a field waking up.

He stood in the cold field and he understood, precisely and completely, what he had watched happen at Aeturnis. He did not write anything. He stood in the field for a while. Then he walked north, toward a desk and a lantern and a manuscript that needed to begin.

CHAPTER 47

THE WITNESS

The room smells of tallow and cold stone and the specific patience of a place that has been waiting for someone to return. He sets his pack down. He has been carrying it for weeks through Aeturnis, through the marshes, through Aridus with its newly green fields that he checks every morning from whatever high ground is available, the way you check something you need to keep being true.

He sits at the desk. The lantern is cold. He lights it. The flame bends when he breathes.

He opens the manuscript. He has been composing it for the entire walk back in his head, in the margins of his journal, in the hour before sleep when the journey replays in the specific order that memory chooses rather than the order it happened. He knows what he's going to write. He has known since the aurora closed and the sky became ordinary and he was alone in Aeturnis with a thread that had gone still and a color he will never be able to describe adequately.

He picks up the pen. He puts it down.

He sits for a while in the silence the lantern makes warm, honest silence, the silence of a room that is waiting without pressure and he thinks about what it means to be the person who records this. Not the person it happened to. Not the Veilborn, not the soldier, not the man who walked thirty-seven iterations of the same broken world holding the same grief. Just the person who was there, who watched, who took notes, who came back.

He thinks about a woman saving his life in the salt flats before she had any reason to. He thinks about a dead fire and a story about stars over Ruina. He thinks about lentil soup, over-salted, eaten on the ground beside a wagon wheel. He thinks about a short involuntary sound that surprised her when it happened. He thinks about Davan, embarrassed in a medical ward at dawn, dismissive about a child he had watched over all night. He thinks about Sorin on a warm morning, offering a deviation from the route because she had asked. He thinks about a woman standing at the edge of a cliff above Vigil's towers, looking at a green sea for an hour, not speaking.

He thinks: someone has to hold these things. The specific ones. The small ones. The ones that would become general in fifty years and legendary in a hundred and eventually become the version where she is a symbol and not a person who laughed at bad navigation and drank cold tea and wanted to see the sea before the end.

He thinks: I am the person who holds them. That was always going to be me.

He picks up the pen again.

I will tell you the truth about Aera Bat-Shalem. Not the truth the songs carry. The other one.

He does not write the second sentence for a while. He sits with the first sentence and lets it be the first sentence, because it has been the first sentence since Exilium, since the salt flats, since a woman saved his life and he started taking notes she did not know about.

He writes the second sentence. Then the third.

Outside, something calls in the dark. A bird. An ordinary bird doing an ordinary bird thing, completely indifferent to the man in this room and the story he is telling and the world that is already, slowly, becoming the kind of world that forgets the specific things in favor of the general ones.

He writes faster. The lantern burns down. Morning comes. He does not notice, because he is doing the only thing that competes with fate, which is recording it accurately before it can become something else.

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There is one thing the manuscript does not record.

Elan did not write it. It happened in the interval between Aeturnis and his walking, in the space of a few minutes he spent with his back turned, and I will record it here only because I think it is necessary, and because I was, for once, facing the right direction.

After the Loom closed after the seam went dark and the sky became ordinary and Davan walked into the light that was not blue and not not-blue she was still there. The Loom had not taken her yet. I do not know if this was mercy or simply the way of it, the specific unhurried patience of a structure that has been broken for thirty years and is in no hurry to take what it is owed.

She was alone. The aurora was ordinary above her and the ground beneath her was cold and she was standing very still, looking at something in her open hand.

I could not see what it was from where I stood. Something small. Something she had been carrying. I do not know when she had taken it out or

whether she had been holding it throughout or whether she had found it only now, in the quiet that followed everything.

She looked at it for a long time. I watched her look at it. The Loom was patient.

Then something happened to her face. Not a smile. Not grief. The specific, private expression of a person who has finally, at the end of everything, understood something they have been circling for a very long time.

She understood him now.

She closed her hand around whatever it was. She closed her eyes. The Loom, finally, came for her.

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Somewhere in the east, above Vigil's towers, the sea is green. It will be green tomorrow. It will be green when no one is watching. It was green before she saw it and it will be green long after the manuscript is finished and the songs have replaced the truth and Elan Marsh is a footnote in a story that has become something easier to carry than the specific thing it was.

The sea does not know it is green. It does not need to.

That is, he writes, perhaps the whole point.

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E N D

A destiny called Ruin. A choice to ruin destiny. What remained was the same.